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Plan calls for wildlife bridges over State Highway 9 near Kremmling

Tonya Bina

tbina@skyhidailynews.com

The first wildlife highway overpasses in the state of Colorado may be constructed on Colo. Highway 9 if initial improvement designs to the highway come to fruition.

The Colorado Department of Transportation rolled out its preliminary design plan to improve Highway 9 safety during a public meeting on April 19 in Kremmling.

The highway, which spans the Grand-Summit border, has long been blamed for a series of wildlife and vehicular accidents, resulting in deaths. Because of the road's hazardous track record, the Blue Valley Ranch outside Kremmling, owned by billionaire hedge fund manager Paul T. Jones II of Greenwich, Conn., donated \$805,000 last March for CDOT design work to get the project "shelf ready" for when there may be state and federal funding available to construct the improvements.

Accidents involving deer, elk, icy conditions or speeding vehicles are a frequent occurrence along a 10-mile Grand County stretch of the two-lane road, which lacks shoulders.

According to CDOT Resident Engineer Jason Smith, the Grand County section of highway was selected among the top 100 miles in Colorado as being heavily impacted by wildlife migration. The highway has since become part of a pilot program the state launched in 2010 to test whether lowering nighttime-only speeds to 55 mph reduces the occurrence of accidents, with double fines invoked at wildlife crossings. The data is still being compiled to show whether the program is making a difference, he said.

The daytime highway speed on Highway 9 is set at 65 miles per hour, but planned improvements to the road should make that speed much safer, according to CDOT engineers. Several years ago, the state identified that stretch of highway as needing shoulder improvements, with the road's listing on the state transportation improvement list, according to Smith.

Highway toll

From 2007 to 2011, there have been 133 vehicular accidents on Highway 9 from the Heeney road on the south to the Colorado River Bridge Crossing on the north, according to CDOT statistics.

Included are three human deaths, 23 people injured, six head-on collisions, four rear-end accidents, two sideswipes while passing, five sideswipes with oncoming vehicles, 45 overturns, and 47 incidents involving wild animals on the road. Five drivers hit the guardrail on the side of the road, while 10 drove onto the embankment.

CDOT is proposing a multi-tiered approach to making the highway safer.

The main thrust in design plans are a total of seven wildlife crossings spaced equally apart in the form of two overpasses and five underpasses. Although underpasses can be found elsewhere in Colorado since they also serve drainage purposes, the two overpasses would be the first of their kind in the state.

Herding

The overpasses would allow for wildlife to travel on a vegetated crossing over the highway. Fencing along the overpass hidden by tall bushes and plantings would serve to create a visual barrier to deter wildlife from being spooked by traffic below, Smith said.

Such wildlife crossing have been successful in Wyoming, Nevada and Utah, he said.

To funnel wildlife to the crossings, wildlife fencing would be installed along all 10 miles of highway.

Engineers hope to have the \$800,000 design phase of the project completed by October, according to Smith.

The project will then stand ready for the \$35 million to \$40 million construction project that could happen when funds become available.

“If a project is on the shelf, it has a really good chance for future funding,” said CDOT engineer Pete Mertes.

“We have a lot going for us,” said Region 3 Grand County Commissioner Gary Bumgarner. “We have a design on the table that's ready to go. And we have a public-private partnership; as we move forward, the higher-ups look to that favorably. ... As states get tighter, there's going to be more and more of that all the time.”

After the meeting, Bumgarner said he could not say whether Grand County would help finance construction of the project in the future. So far, the county's role has been to hold the \$805,000 gift from Blue Valley Ranch and pass it through to CDOT for the design work.

Passing lanes?

Although the plan seemed to be well-received by a gathering of citizens at CDOT's presentation, at least one citizen hoped for a detail that appeared to be overlooked.

“I was surprised not to see a passing lane,” said Jeff Miller, of Kremmling. Miller said oftentimes motorists become frustrated with a slow-moving motorhome or truck on the road, and a passing lane or pull-out “now and then” might alleviate unsafe driving behavior.

Roadway studies showed passing lanes were not warranted at this time, responded CDOT engineers, based on traffic volumes, but they would “take the comment into consideration.”

And Blue Valley Ranch Manager Perry Handyside wondered —jokingly — if he might be able to deer hunt on one of those overpasses someday.

From the back of the room, CDOT's Steve Bokros responded: “Yes, but that permit is going to cost you \$35 to \$40 million.”

Project details

Proposed Colo. Highway 9 improvements from milepost 126 to milepost 137 (Grand County side):

- Wildlife crossings
- Wildlife fence along right of way
- Horizontal and vertical alignments to meet 65 mph design speed
- Widening of roadway template to include 8-foot shoulders
- Flatten side slopes to allow vehicle recovery area
- New signage and striping
- Safety devices, such as guardrails, where needed
- New drainage structures

— Source: Colorado Department of Transportation



The Colorado Department of Transportation's draft proposal to improve the safety on State Highway 9 comprises seven wildlife bridges, two of which would be wildlife overpasses.

Map courtesy of the Colorado Department of Transportation