

California Tahoe Conservancy
Agenda Item 9
September 17, 2026

South Tahoe Basin Wildlife Crossings Planning

Recommended Action: Adopt Resolution 26-09-02 (Attachment 1) authorizing California Tahoe Conservancy (Conservancy) staff to accept and expend up to \$1 million of grant funding, enter into all necessary agreements, and take all other steps necessary to support planning activities for the South Tahoe Basin Wildlife Crossings Project (Project).

Executive Summary: Conservancy staff requests authorization to accept and expend grant funds and execute agreements to facilitate the Project. The Project is a planning effort to assess locations for roadway crossing structures to enhance wildlife connectivity and reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions in the southern portion of the Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin), develop plans and designs, and conduct environmental review.

The recommended action supports a partnership to advance priority wildlife crossings in South Lake Tahoe. This partnership is led by the Wildlife Crossing Fund (Fund), a non-governmental organization that supports innovative projects to reconnect ecosystems disrupted by roadways. In May 2026, the California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) awarded a \$4.9 million planning grant to the Fund for the Project. The Conservancy is supporting this planning grant by participating in the planning team and conveying WCB funding to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). The Conservancy also manages land adjacent to known wildlife barriers.

The recommended action is consistent with the goals of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan to Safeguard the Basin's Environmental, Cultural, Tribal, and Recreational Attributes for Future Generations; Restore the Basin's Social and Ecological Resilience; and Care for the Basin's Natural, Tribal, and Cultural Resources. The recommended action also advances the State of California's Pathways to 30x30 strategy and the California State Wildlife Action Plan.

Location: Project partners will assess potential wildlife crossing locations in El Dorado County along, within, and adjacent to U.S. Highway 50 (U.S. 50), State Route 89 (S.R. 89), and Pioneer Trail (Attachment 2).

Fiscal Summary: The staff requests authority to accept and expend up to \$1 million in Proposition 4 (Climate Bond) funding from the WCB to support the Project.

Overview

History

Habitat connectivity allows the unimpeded movement of wildlife across landscapes, which is essential to maintaining healthy, resilient ecosystems and wildlife populations. When landscapes are connected, wildlife are able to move safely among feeding, breeding, nesting, and seasonal habitats. Connected landscapes support genetic diversity, and reduce the risk of isolated populations declining or disappearing. Species are also more able to adapt to changing environmental conditions, including development, wildfire, drought, and climate change, when provided pathways to more suitable habitat.

The Basin contains essential regional habitat connectivity for a wide range of species, which helps to support biodiversity. However, existing development and the network of high-traffic roads bisect the landscape, creating the risk of wildlife mortality from vehicle collisions and disrupting wildlife movement through key habitat. Partners wish to address this by analyzing and addressing barriers to wildlife connectivity.

In 2023, the Conservancy provided a grant to Wildlands Network for the Tahoe Basin Wildlife Connectivity Study, a five-year study of wildlife connectivity throughout the California side of the Basin. Through this study, Wildlands Network and their partners collected extensive camera footage of wildlife species such as black bear, bobcat, coyote, mule deer, and porcupine. This footage has helped partners understand where and how wildlife move through the landscape. Often, the footage shows animals investigating culverts and bridges, finding the structures unsuitable for passage, and then choosing to cross roadways in front of on-coming vehicles. This poses a high risk for wildlife and motorists. The study and camera footage has helped partners identify key roadway barriers to wildlife movement, which generally occur where roads cross creeks and rivers because watercourses provide important corridors for many wildlife species (Attachment 2).

Project partners, which also include federal agencies, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, El Dorado County, and the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, analyzed preliminary data from the study to prioritize wildlife crossings in need of improvement. Partners identified six critical connectivity barriers in the South Lake Tahoe area. All six barriers are within or adjacent to the Upper Truckee River watershed, where the Conservancy and partners have significantly invested in habitat restoration activities. Partners then collaborated on priorities and funding needs, which led to the Fund applying to the WCB for a planning grant on behalf of the partnership. The WCB is a state grant-making agency dedicated to safeguarding California's spectacular biological diversity and wild spaces, and is the major funder for connectivity restoration in California.

On May 28, 2026, the WCB awarded a \$4.9 million planning grant to the Fund for the Project. The Fund and partners will use this grant funding to further refine priority locations and advance several elements to shovel-ready status. This will involve completing feasibility analysis, environmental documentation, and engineering. These tasks will be significant due to the complexity of designing and engineering features such as new

roadway bridges. Funding may not be adequate to address all six identified barriers. Therefore, partners will strategically pursue the most cost-effective and high-impact opportunities to improve wildlife corridors across these roadways.

Detailed Description of Recommended Action

The recommended action supports significant planning to restore wildlife connectivity at multiple barrier locations along U.S. 50, S.R. 89, and Pioneer Trail. To advance the Project, partners will consider various ways to improve wildlife connectivity through these roadways, such as retrofitting large culverts into open span bridges, upgrading culverts to facilitate large mammal movement through them, and retrofitting bridges to create banks for wildlife passage. Partners will produce preliminary project scopes, cost estimates, and feasibility analyses to determine which locations should move forward into engineering and design.

Conservancy staff will work closely with the Fund and partners to complete the Project. The Conservancy will accept a subgrant of up to \$1 million for the Conservancy and Caltrans to participate in the planning effort and for Caltrans to complete environmental documentation. Caltrans, with support from the Conservancy, is well positioned to lead the Project's environmental tasks to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and other laws. The Fund will use the remaining \$3.9 million of the WCB grant funds to complete feasibility analysis at all six barrier locations, and engineering and design work at the highest priority locations to prepare for future implementation.

1. Overall Context and Benefits

The recommended action is critical for the Conservancy and Caltrans to advance elements of this significant planning effort, which is the first of its kind in the Basin for terrestrial wildlife. Conservancy involvement is important because Conservancy lands and restoration projects play a crucial role for connectivity and are adjacent to and within the Project area. The recommended action also supports Caltrans completing environmental documentation, a necessary step in the planning process.

The Project will help restore habitat connectivity, improve public safety, and provide safe passage for wildlife through the Basin. The Basin is home to numerous species that are vulnerable to climate change. These species need to move to adapt to changing conditions, find water resources in severe drought, and escape from wildfires. U.S. 50, S.R. 89, and Pioneer Trail restrict these movements to important climate refugia in higher elevations, thereby increasing vulnerability to climate impacts. The Project will lead to future crossings to increase connectivity across the landscape, foster movement across roadways, and allow species to adapt to a changing climate.

The Project's priority wildlife movement barriers are within or directly adjacent to the Upper Truckee River watershed, which includes Trout Creek. Federal, Tribal, state, regional, and local partners have invested heavily in this watershed to address decades of disturbance and development. Basin partners are restoring the Upper Truckee River and Trout Creek to increase climate resilience and enhance wildlife habitat. Therefore,

improving wildlife connectivity along these watercourses as part of ongoing and regionally significant restoration efforts is important.

Partners will also work together to seek implementation funds to build priority structures. Connectivity experts and funders understand that restoring habitat connectivity throughout the Basin will require additional work beyond the Project. As the Tahoe Basin Wildlife Connectivity Study provides more data, partners will pursue additional projects to restore connectivity and protect biodiversity.

2. Schedule for the Project

Phase	Completion Date
Execute agreements	Fall 2026
Project Management and Coordination	Summer 2026 – Spring 2029
Planning and Environmental Documents	Spring 2029

Financing

The staff will accept and expend up to \$1 million of Proposition 4 (Climate Bond) funds from the WCB to support the Project. The Conservancy will use a portion of this funding for staff time to support the planning activities. The Conservancy will convey up to \$800,000 of the grant funding to Caltrans for planning activities that Caltrans will lead.

Authority

Consistency with the Conservancy's Enabling Legislation

The recommended action is consistent with the Conservancy's enabling Legislation. Specifically, Government Code section 66908 authorizes the Conservancy to receive reimbursements and other funds from public agencies. In addition, Government Code sections 66905.2 and 66907.7 authorize the Conservancy to award grants to local public agencies, state agencies, federal agencies, federally recognized Indian tribes, the Tahoe Transportation District, and nonprofit organizations for purposes consistent with its mission.

Consistency with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan

The recommended action is consistent with the Conservancy's Strategic Plan goals to Safeguard the Basin's Environmental, Cultural, Tribal, and Recreational Attributes for Future Generations; Restore the Basin's Social and Ecological Resilience; and Care for the Basin's Natural, Tribal, and Cultural Resources.

Consistency with the Conservancy's Program Guidelines

The recommended action is consistent with the Conservancy's Stream Environment Program Objectives and Forestry Program Guidelines. Upon completion of the Project, and if the partners secure funding for implementation, the planned wildlife crossings would enhance habitat, create an environment that is more resilient to climate change, and improve habitat connectivity for aquatic and terrestrial species.

Consistency with External Authorities

The recommended action is consistent with Pathways to 30x30, which has a priority to “Improve habitat connectivity and other actions that build the resilience of species and habitats by facilitating plant and animal migration and gene flow.” Furthermore, the recommended action advances the California State Wildlife Action Plan, including Goal 2.1 (Connectivity): “Maintain and improve connectivity vital for sustaining ecosystems.”

Compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act

Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15000 et seq.), certain classes of activities are statutorily exempt from CEQA or are exempt because they have been determined by the Secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency to have no significant effect on the environment. The staff has evaluated this Project and found it to be exempt under CEQA. This Project qualifies for a statutory exemption under CEQA Guidelines section 15262 (feasibility and planning studies). The staff has prepared a notice of exemption (NOE) for the Project (Attachment 3). If the Board approves the Project, the staff will file the NOE with the State Clearinghouse pursuant to CEQA Guidelines, section 15062.

List of Attachments

Attachment 1 – Resolution 26-09-02

Attachment 2 – Location Map

Attachment 3 – Notice of Exemption

- Exhibit A: NOE Location Map

Conservancy Staff Contact

Joseph Harvey, Senior Environmental Scientist

joseph.harvey@tahoe.ca.gov