Academic BRIDGING FUTURES scholarship

I-90 WILDLIFE BRIDGES COALITION

Washington State Department of Transportation

I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East and wildlife crossing FAQ sheet

(use this information to help develop your design and write your essay)

What is the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East project?

• The I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East project is a 15-mile corridor improvement project that begins at Hyak and ends at Easton.
• The Legislature approved $551 million to design and construct the first five miles of the project from Hyak to Keechelus Dam.
• The Hyak to Keechelus Dam project will provide a safer, more reliable six-lane freeway, straighten roadway curves, replace old pavement, and reduce rock fall hazards.
• WSDOT will also construct wildlife crossings over and under I-90 for the safe movement of wildlife and enhance wetlands and habitats throughout the corridor.
• Construction began in 2009 on the first five miles of the I-90 corridor between Hyak and Keechelus Dam and is scheduled to be complete in 2017.
• WSDOT is using funding allocated by the 2012 Transportation Budget to design and build the next two miles of the I-90 corridor from Keechelus Dam to Stampede Pass interchange, which includes the first wildlife crossing in the state located at the Price / Noble Creek connectivity area, eight miles east of Snoqualmie Summit.

Why is the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East project important?

• I-90 is the main east to west transportation corridor across Washington state.
• I-90 connects the deep-water ports, large population centers, and retail and service businesses of the Puget Sound with the farmlands, industries, and extensive outdoor recreational areas of Eastern Washington.
• The uninterrupted movement of cars, trucks, freight, and recreational vehicles across the Cascade Mountains and Snoqualmie Pass is essential to our quality of life and the economic vitality of our state.

Why are wildlife crossings needed on I-90 east of Snoqualmie Pass?

• Currently, I-90 acts as a barrier to wildlife trying to migrate through the Central Cascades and is likely isolating wildlife populations. As I-90 expands it will make this barrier worse.
• Wildlife crossing structures correct fish passage barriers, reconnect habitat along the Central Cascades and improve motorist safety by reducing costly and dangerous collisions between wildlife and vehicles.
• WSDOT's plans for wildlife crossings comply with the U.S. Forest Service plans to manage the forest in the area, which identified I-90 as a barrier to the movement of wildlife.

How do engineers know where to put wildlife crossings?

• WSDOT has conducted five years of pre-construction baseline wildlife monitoring to identify different species and provided recommendations to guide project design.
• These monitoring efforts include camera studies, snow tracking, movement data, public reporting with the I-90 Wildlife Watch program, habitat studies, genetic sample collection, and inventory of dead animals removed from the side of the highway.

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How will wildlife know to use the crossings?

• WSDOT will place wildlife crossings in areas where streams already cross under the highway, and where monitoring data helps prioritize areas to invest in enhancing connectivity.
• Fencing will be used once crossing structures are in place to exclude wildlife from the highway and guide wildlife to crossing structures.

Where is the Price/Noble Creek connectivity area?

• The Price/Noble Creek connectivity area is located on I-90 east of Snoqualmie Pass at milepost 60.

Why is the Price/Noble Creek connectivity area a good location for a wildlife crossing?

• The Price/Noble connectivity zone lies within a Connectivity Emphasis Area that has historically been identified as a hot spot for collisions between wildlife and vehicles. The I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project's Environmental Statement discusses this Connectivity Emphasis Area in greater detail, and baseline wildlife monitoring reports available on our contest resource page confirm.
• Current wildlife monitoring reveals high quality mature forest, which provides the best habitat for wildlife.
• This location is ideal to promote wildlife and habitat connections because the landscape naturally funnels wildlife between the steep slopes of Rampart Ridge and the lower lands between Keechelus and Kachess Lakes.

What types of fish and wildlife live in the Cascade mountains?

• The Cascade mountains are home to over 60 species of mammals, 229 species of birds, and 11 species of amphibians, 8 native fish, and 5 reptiles.
• Commonly seen species such as deer and elk, plus bear, cougar and many smaller and more elusive species are found in this area, and must travel from one side of I-90 to the other.

What types of plants and trees grow in the Cascade mountains?

• At Snoqualmie Pass, it is common to see sub-alpine meadows and forests of Pacific silver fir and mountain hemlock. Moving eastward, there is a transition to grand fir and Douglas fir in the lower elevations near Easton.
• The forested landscape is fragmented due to past harvest on private and U.S. Forest Service land. Some small patches of late successional, or old growth forests, occur within the I-90 project corridor. Many of these patches are located within or adjacent to the land bordering I-90. Wetland and riparian communities are interspersed throughout the project area.

How will wildlife bridges benefit people?

• Building wildlife crossings on I-90 will reduce the number of wildlife on the roadway, and the number of vehicle-wildlife collisions in this stretch of highway.

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What is ecological connectivity and how does it relate to the I-90 project?

• Ecological connectivity happens when the landscape features facilitate unrestricted movement of wildlife.
• I-90 acts as a barrier to ecological connectivity.
• Improving ecological connectivity increases fish and wildlife population resiliency overall, while reducing the immediate safety risks for people and wildlife associated with wildlife attempted to cross on the roadway.

Why is it important that the crossing structures match the landscape?

• The project area is within the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway National Scenic Byway, which is designated as a Washington State Scenic Byway. This designation is based on the route's outstanding scenic character and environmental experiences.
• Because this project is within a State and National Scenic Byway, visual qualities of all components of the project are especially important, and any changes in the corridor should retain those qualities as much as possible.

What environmental and engineering challenges are there with building the I-90 project?

• The project presents many unique environmental and design challenges due to I-90's location between a mountain pass and a lake in the Central Cascades.
• The project area receives high levels of rain and snow, requiring specialized designs to manage stormwater runoff and snow storage.
• Some areas along I-90 are susceptible to rockfall and avalanches.
• Large areas of protected state, federal, and conservation lands north and south of I-90 support a broad range of habitats and a diverse array of plants and wildlife that have been separated by the highway.
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What is a Connectivity Emphasis Area?

• Connectivity Emphasis Areas are locations in the project area that could especially benefit from connectivity improvements. Most of these areas are at stream crossings, but some are located within larger wildlife corridors away from streams.

More information is available at http://i90wildlifebridges.org/bridging-futures-2014