

SENATE THIRD READING
SB 1250 (Cortese)
As Amended August 13, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Requires the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in connection with each four-year revision of the state's transportation asset management plan (TAMP), to publish a supplemental list of wildlife connectivity improvements to the state highway system (SHS) and requires Caltrans to review, in consultation with the Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) the state highway system (SHS) to develop a comprehensive approach to address wildlife connectivity needs.

Major Provisions

- 1) Replaces "wildlife passage features" with "wildlife connectivity improvements" throughout this bill and existing law governing state highway wildlife connectivity, including relevant local general plan policies.
- 2) Requires Caltrans to publish a supplement list of wildlife connectivity improvements, informed by the TAMP, to the SHS, including those completed on or after January 1, 2023 that address or enhance wildlife connectivity needs and that could reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, pursuant to existing law.
 - a) Requires Caltrans, for each wildlife connectivity improvement listed, to disclose its location, the type and condition of the relevant transportation infrastructure, a description of the wildlife connectivity barriers addressed or proposed to be addressed, and applicable performance objectives or measures contained in the State Highway System Management Plan or TAMP.
 - b) Requires Caltrans to publish the supplemental list on its internet website no later than six months after the publication of each four-year TAMP revision.
 - c) Requires the California Transportation Commission (CTC) to review and approve the supplemental list.
- 3) Replaces legislative intent language with a mandate obligating Caltrans to review the full extent of the state highway system, in consultation with CDFW, to develop a comprehensive approach to address wildlife connectivity needs throughout the state.
- 4) As part of existing statutory requirements to inventory wildlife connectivity needs on the SHS, requires Caltrans to update the inventory based on analysis of transportation assets within priority route segments identified by CDFW.
 - a) During development of the inventory, imposes various due process requirements on Caltrans including giving CDFW notice six months before publication, establishing a consultation process requiring both departments to meet at least once during initial development and once before release of the draft, and 90 days before publication, requires Caltrans to provide CDFW the draft inventory or update and solicit its input; and,

- b) Before finalizing the inventory, Caltrans must provide CDFW a written summary of how significant comments were addressed.
- 5) Requires Caltrans to include wildlife connectivity as an objective in the State Highway System Management Plan and in doing so, requires it to consider the above supplemental list, including the need for new assets, the condition and functionality of existing assets, and the extent to which those assets advance the objectives of Caltrans' existing wildlife connectivity obligations.

COMMENTS

The state highway system creates wildlife barriers. According to CDFW, "Habitat connectivity is critical for maintaining viable populations of wildlife species, particularly in the face of anthropogenic pressures and a changing climate. Barriers created by linear infrastructure such as roads, railways, and canals can influence wildlife movement, impede genetic exchange among populations, cause direct mortality, and ultimately reduce resilience of populations."

And as stated in Caltrans' 2024 Wildlife Connectivity Program Report, the first inventory of wildlife barriers on the SHS required by existing law, "Caltrans is one of the largest landowners in California, managing approximately 15,181 miles of SHS Infrastructure, including roadways, railways, canals, walls, fencing, and other human made features bisect high quality habitat, creating barriers for over 180 threatened or endangered species...Habitat loss through landscape fragmentation and development have led to isolated species populations and reduced genetic dispersal. Improving connectivity to fragmented habitats will aid in the resilience of terrestrial and aquatic species to drought, wildfire, and other climate change stressors, and further reduce animal/vehicle collisions. As lanes have been added and traffic has increased, animal/vehicle roadkill rates have also increased." In this report, Caltrans identified 31 active or funded remediation projects, 37 in the planning stage, and 76 in need of funding (of this total, over half overlap with CDFW priorities mentioned below).

Based on three statewide assessments, the latest in 2024, CDFW identified 204 "segments of linear infrastructure" mostly associated with the SHS, totaling just over 3,000 miles that results in barriers to wildlife movement. (This amount does not include barriers to anadromous fish passage, which this bill does not address). Of this total, 60 segments totaling 664 miles are "priority segments" constituting the highest priority for remediation in each of the six CDFW regions, and 12 segments totaling 313 miles are "top statewide priorities". Top priority barriers include US 395 in Lassen County, SR-17 in Santa Cruz County, SR-58 in Kern County, I-15 in San Diego and Riverside Counties, and US-395 in Mono County that impact species such as deer, elk, bighorn sheep, bear, wolf, coyote, and reptiles; 10 of the 12 top priority barriers impact mountain lions.

Species attempting to cross a barrier can result in wildlife-vehicle collisions, risking public safety and causing animal fatalities. According to the California Highway Patrol, between 2021 and 2025, 10,633 wildlife-vehicle collisions (over 2,100/year) have been reported resulting in 19 fatalities and 1,966 injuries to drivers or passengers. In a 2024 report, the UC Davis Road Ecology Center estimates that vehicles kill more than 48,000 mule deer (twice as many than from hunting), close to 100 mountain lions, and thousands of other animals annually on the state's roads.

Should wildlife crossings be considered a traditional transportation asset? As amended, this bill requires Caltrans to supplement the TAMP with a list of wildlife connectivity needs on the SHS and information about a barrier's location, type and condition and how Caltrans proposes to remediate it.

A TAMP is a federally required plan that is essentially a long-term maintenance and investment strategy for the roads and bridges within both the national highway system (NHS) and SHS. Congress first required states to develop TAMPs in 2018 and update them every four years. The TAMP maps out when and how to maintain existing infrastructure proactively, stretching every dollar as far as possible. Over a 10-year horizon, the TAMP details management of the full life cycle of transportation assets—principally pavement and bridges—to minimize costs, manage risks, measure performance gaps, and identify funding and actions to close them.

For example, Caltrans annually collects data on the condition of pavement for every 1/10th of a mile on the NHS and SHS. It then assigns a baseline condition (e.g., good, fair, poor) and a desired condition over a 10-year period (e.g., 60% in good condition). Using models to estimate pavement deterioration rates and other technical data, Caltrans forecasts pavement conditions over 10 years and types and costs of treatment or maintenance (e.g., coatings, grinding, asphalt overlay) over time that can best achieve and prolong desired pavement conditions. Finally, Caltrans identifies available funding and investment strategies to meet this condition and any projected gaps in funding.

Including wildlife connectivity needs as a supplement to the TAMP is a more sensible approach since it is unclear how a wildlife crossing or fencing, some of which would likely constitute new construction and thus not appropriate for the TAMP, can reasonably and logically fit into the above TAMP planning process. Such features, however worthy, serve a non-transportation purpose and thus may not be compatible with traditional transportation asset planning.

The bill requires the CTC to review and approve the supplemental list but it is silent as to the standard of review and whether the CTC has the authority to disapprove it or require changes. The author may wish to clarify this provision or consider whether formal CTC approval is necessary.

State Highway System Management Plan (SHSMP) already includes wildlife connectivity. In addition to the TAMP, state law requires Caltrans to prepare what is essentially a complementary 10-year plan for the SHS. The SHSMP overlaps and addresses most federal TAMP requirements but goes beyond the TAMP by including assets for the state's highway repair and maintenance program (SHOPP), transit facilities and specific projects in each Caltrans district intended to meet various performance targets. In other words, it is a more actionable document rather than merely analytical.

In fact, the 2025 draft SHSMP already includes fish and wildlife connectivity assets, including related performance metrics, targets and remedial measures and it appears this bill simply codifies this practice by requiring Caltrans to include wildlife connectivity as a SHSMP objective. As of September 2024, Caltrans has inventoried 89 priority barriers caused by culverts and bridges that impede movement of threatened or endangered wildlife—of these, 49 have a nexus with a transportation or maintenance project, seven are in the project planning stage, and one is on deck for planning in the future. The rest are unplanned because they lack a transportation nexus.

Currently, Caltrans only remediates barriers on the SHS opportunistically if there is a nexus with a planned repair or maintenance project; for example, a culvert causing a wildlife barrier can be upsized if it already scheduled to be repaired or replaced. Caltrans also remediates barriers as mitigation if required by a permit or regulation. Once a wildlife connectivity project is included in the SHSMP, it takes about two years to develop a project scope, cost and scheduling information and receive SHOPP funding from the CTC. According to the 2025 draft SHSMP, over the next 5-10 years, on-going assessments of potential wildlife barriers are anticipated to identify several hundred and to the extent this bill elevates the consultative role of CDFW even more barriers could be identified.

Caltrans is also involved with other remediation projects sponsored or funded by other entities (e.g., Wildlife Conservation Board) that do not have a nexus to active or planned transportation projects. Of the remediation projects included in Caltrans's 2024 wildlife connectivity inventory (mentioned above), seven have been developed or are actively being developed, including the Wallis Annenberg wildlife overcrossing in Los Angeles County, and nine are in the planning stages.

Given the work Caltrans has already undertaken, the SHSMP is the more appropriate planning document to house specific wildlife connectivity projects for funding and remediation rather than the TAMP. This bill appears to acknowledge this by requiring the wildlife connectivity supplement to include applicable performance objectives or measures contained in the SHSMP.

Caltrans-CDFW Consultation. Recent amendments to this bill elevate the role of CDFW in the development of the existing inventory and establish a formal consultative process between the two departments. This has long been a priority of wildlife advocates concerned about the lack of sufficient dialogue between the departments in the development of the inventory. With respect to the development of the supplemental list, the bill makes clear that Caltrans is not required ...to independently assess the condition of natural landscapes, wildlife, habitat, or other factors unrelated to the transportation infrastructure or improvement...". This addresses concerns that limited transportation funding should not be used for expenditures unrelated to transportation infrastructure or active transportation projects.

Sufficient funding for barrier remediation is lacking. Given a lack of dedicated funding for remediation and the significant demand for SHOPP funds only a handful of wildlife remediation projects have been completed to date though, as noted above, a sizable number of projects are in the planning stage. Once a barrier has been identified, Caltrans states that it takes two to three years to conduct field assessments, assess species impacts, and develop appropriate engineering and remediation plans. In response to AB 2344 (Friedman), Chapter 964, Statutes of 2022, the Legislature appropriated funding in the 2023-24 budget for Caltrans to begin the above assessment work and in October 2024, Caltrans kicked off a partnership with the California Conservation Corp to characterize barriers and gather field data and other information on over 10,000 miles of the SHS, some of which overlaps with CDFW priorities segments, to be used by biologists to develop priorities and assess data gaps.

However, the Legislature has yet to appropriate funding to fully implement AB 2344, which requires Caltrans to develop a more systematic approach to remediate barriers and to consider remediating barriers as standalone projects rather than solely in tandem with planned transportation projects.

According to the Author

"California's highways connect our communities and carry millions of drivers safely to work, school, and home every day. But too often, those same roadways become places where drivers encounter animals in the roadway with little warning, creating dangerous situations that can lead to serious crashes, injuries, and costly damage. We know these collisions are preventable. At the same time, roadway barriers severely restrict animal movement...Wildlife crossings and related infrastructure have been shown to dramatically reduce collisions between vehicles and animals, yet too often these solutions are treated as stand-alone projects rather than incorporated into routine highway planning. SB 1250 makes clear that improving roadway safety means planning ahead by using the same data, engineering, and investment strategies we apply to other highway risks to identify collision hotspots and address them as part of how we build and maintain California's transportation system."

Arguments in Support

In support of this bill, a coalition of environmental organizations write: "California's roads fragment habitat and create dangerous conditions for people and wildlife. Wildlife crossings are not being planned for and implemented at a sufficient level because they are not treated as core transportation infrastructure. Caltrans does not systematically integrate wildlife connectivity into its asset management system, so crossings are often handled as stand-alone conservation projects instead of being built alongside routine highway upgrades. SB 1250 addresses long-recognized gaps by: (1) establishing wildlife connectivity as a formal performance objective within the asset management system; (2) requiring clear connectivity targets in the TAMP; and (3) clarifying a collaborative, transparent process for public input and interagency coordination to develop Caltrans' inventory of connectivity needs."

Arguments in Opposition

None on file.

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, significant annual ongoing costs of an unknow, but substantial amount to Caltrans to develop a supplemental list of wildlife connectivity improvements on the state highway system every four years. (State Highway Account).

All work required by this bill is consistent with and can be incorporated into work DFW must do pursuant to prior enacted legislation (AB 2344 (Friedman), Chapter 964, Statutes of 2022) that requires Caltrans, in consultation with DFW and other appropriate agencies, to take actions to address wildlife connectivity needs related to the state highway system.

VOTES**SENATE FLOOR: 37-0-3**

YES: Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Ochoa Bogh, Padilla, Pérez, Reyes, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

ABS, ABST OR NV: Jones, Niello, Valladares

ASM TRANSPORTATION: 11-4-1

YES: Wilson, Ahrens, Ávila Farías, Carrillo, Elhawary, Harabedian, Hart, Jackson, Papan, Ransom, Rogers

NO: Davies, Hoover, Lackey, Macedo

ABS, ABST OR NV: Ward

ASM WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE: 9-1-3

YES: Papan, Alvarez, Ávila Farías, Bennett, Boerner, Caloza, Hadwick, Hart, Rogers

NO: Jeff Gonzalez

ABS, ABST OR NV: Alanis, Bains, Celeste Rodriguez

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 11-4-0

YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache

NO: Hoover, Dixon, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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CONSULTANT: Dan Chia / TRANS. / (916) 319-2093

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