

WATCH OUT FOR WILDLIFE

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Abstract

This paper describes a new program to educate motorists about transportation related wildlife mortality. The intent of the program is to raise motorist awareness of the problem so they will exhibit a higher level of caution when in areas with wildlife.

Introduction

Through the joint efforts of the Florida Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Forest Service, Montana Department of Transportation, and Defenders of Wildlife, a better understanding of the relationships of wildlife ecology and transportation have resulted. The three conferences that have resulted from this partnership have brought together some of the best researchers from around the world to share their thoughts on this area of science. The resulting proceedings are increasingly being recognized as the most comprehensive work on wildlife ecology and transportation. Of course, one of the conclusions from this body of research is that wildlife mortality can be problematic in areas where transportation facilities cross natural habitats. To date, the measures taken to reduce mortality have either been traffic operations measures (signing and speed limit reduction) or structural (wildlife overpasses or under passes). The traffic operations measures have been of questionable value while the structural solutions are very costly.

As traffic increases on our national highway system and habitat continues to decrease, the concerns about wildlife mortality on highways can be expected to increase. Because the highway program will not have the sufficient resources to place wildlife overpasses or underpasses or other structural solutions at all of the locations experiencing high wildlife mortality, other measures to address concerns are necessary. The placement of structures in areas where lands are privately owned also is problematic in that access to those private lands needs to be maintained. The Watch Out for Wildlife program suggests that a program of motorist and school children education about the relationships of transportation facilities to wildlife could positively influence present and future motorists such that the level of awareness of drivers is raised to the point that more collisions will be avoided.

Program

Using FHWA research funding, the Florida Department of Transportation has contracted a consultant to research and develop materials to be used in a national campaign of motorists and school children education designed to raise motorist awareness of the possibility of collision with wildlife to the point that avoidance of collision is more likely. The areas of emphasis for the campaign will be on our public lands where the habitat is being managed for wildlife values. Motorist appreciation of wildlife is generally higher when visiting these areas and therefore the potential to reduce collision should also be high. It is expected that a spinoff of the campaign will be to reach all motorists in all areas of the country but the target audience will be motorists on public lands.

The products of the first phase of the campaign will be the development, to the point of production, of materials to be used in the campaign. The products will be provided to the Federal Highway Administration, the Florida Department of Transportation and for that matter, any organization that the FHWA and FDOT determines can help promote the program. The actual production and distribution of these materials will be a Phase II effort of the campaign designed to utilize all of the resources available to produce and disseminate the materials.

The following are the activities for Phase I:

1. Research which materials will be most effective to reach motorists utilizing public lands. Such items as bumper stickers, brochures, poster, signs, billboards, vides, etc. will be considered as possibilities for the campaign.
2. Identify a group of materials and /or measures which will make up the main body of the campaign.
3. Coordinate with the FHWA and FDOT, the design of production ready products to be used in the campaign.
4. Complete the designs and materials to be used to the point where they are production ready.
5. Provide copies of these materials to the FHWA and FDOT for development of Phase II strategies.

The materials developed will be suitable for mass production at reasonable cost such that the organizations interested in helping with the campaign can receive quantities of the materials from FHWA and/or FDOT; or if they choose can produce quantities of the materials for distribution. Further, the use of the media through press releases, videos, etc. is a planned component of the campaign.

Potential Benefits

The goal of the campaign will be to reduce vehicular collisions with wildlife on a national basis. The benefit will be to increase motorist safety and reduced impacts to important wildlife species. Cost savings can be experienced by transportation agencies through reduced need for structural alternatives. The improved awareness will also reduce mortality in natural areas that are in public ownership.

Implementation

FHWA and FDOT will jointly work on production and dissemination of the materials utilizing all available resources to promote Watch Out for Wildlife throughout the country. The program is expected to receive a lot of support and cooperation from both the public and private sector with commitment of resources available to these groups. It is expected to catch on quickly given some high level press releases and endorsements. The largest cost of implementation will be mass production of materials which can be carried out by multiple participants in a phased manner dictated by resources available at the time.