
PROTECTING SPIRIT OF PLACE: RECONSTRUCTING HIGHWAYS, MAINTAINING HABITAT CONNECTIVITY, AND RESPECTING TRIBAL CULTURE

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The US Highway 93 North reconstruction project on the Flathead Reservation in represents one of the most extensive wildlife-sensitive highway design efforts to date in North America. The reconstruction of the 56 mile long road section included the installation of wildlife crossing structures and wildlife exclusion fences. The mitigation measures were aimed at improving safety for the traveling public through reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions, while simultaneously allowing wildlife to continue to move across the road. These measures were an integral part of the reconstruction of this highway because the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes required the reconstructed highway to be respectful of the land, the people and their culture, and wildlife. This project provided an opportunity to evaluate the extent these mitigation measures helped improve human safety through a reduction in wildlife-vehicle collisions; and maintain habitat connectivity for wildlife. Wildlife-vehicle collision data were obtained from Montana Department of Transportation. Completed wildlife crossing structures were monitored for wildlife movements between 2010 and 2015 using wildlife cameras (Reconyx, PM35 and PC900 HyperFire). The reconstruction of US 93 North improved human safety in general along the entire transportation corridor between Evaro and Polson. The total number of reported crashes decreased by approximately 33%. However, the number of reported wildlife-vehicle collisions did not decrease over the entire length of the highway between Evaro and Polson. Total wildlife use of the 29 crossing structures that were monitored can be described as substantial with 95,274 successful crossings in total, and 22,648 successful crossings per year.