

Yellowstone Safe Passages - A Community Approach to Addressing Wildlife-Vehicle Conflicts in Montana's Upper Yellowstone Watershed

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Several decades of credible research in North America have demonstrated the efficacy of wildlife crossing structures (wildlife overpasses, underpasses, and large culverts paired with diversion fences). Bringing these solutions to the ground in rural communities, however, is often easier said than done; Road ecologists, agencies, non-governmental organizations, and stakeholders seeking to advance wildlife-vehicle conflict (WVC) reduction strategies are bound to face complex social and political dynamics at the local level, particularly where private landholdings exist adjacent to roadways. The work invariably requires a thoughtful, community-oriented approach. The following presentation is a reflection from Yellowstone Safe Passages (YSP) - a group of citizens, organizations, agencies, elected officials, and philanthropists on a mission to address and resolve WVCs on US89 between Livingston and Gardiner, Montana. Throughout the presentation I elevate the importance of collaboration. It begins by bringing information into the community, inviting community members into the problem-solving circle, and raising awareness about solutions. I encourage subtle culture shifts, where transparency of knowledge and data becomes an unspoken mantra; where deeper awareness of landownership and private property rights invites novel partnerships; and where framing WVCs as an impact on livelihoods enables leaders to consider that human safety is not a measure of life and death, but rather of an individual's ability to thrive. The purpose of this presentation is to articulate how YSP's experiences might apply to other communities across the State of Montana.