



January 27, 2023

John P. Donnelly, Executive Director
California Wildlife Conservation Board
P.O. Box 944209
Sacramento, CA 94244-2090

RE: I-8 Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Crossing Project - SUPPORT

Dear Mr. Donnelly,

The undersigned non-profit wildlife conservation organizations are pleased to offer our strong support for the “I-8 Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Crossing Project”, and we urge that the Wildlife Conservation Board approve funding for the proposal.

The “I-8 Peninsular Bighorn Sheep Crossing Project” seeks to enhance permeability across Interstate 8 just east of the Imperial-San Diego County line to alleviate one of California’s most problematic barriers to wildlife movement. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s California Wildlife Barriers 2022 report listed this section of Interstate 8 (W061) as one of twelve statewide priority barriers. The section of Interstate 8 through the In-Ko-Pah Gorge bisects important habitat used as a movement corridor by endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep and specifically for the In-Ko-Pah ewe group that uses the area for giving birth and raising their lambs. As traffic loads increase, bighorn sheep will eventually no longer be able to cross the Interstate to reach critical resources for their survival.

Bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) inhabiting the Peninsular Ranges of southern California were listed as threatened by the California Fish and Game Commission in 1984 and listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1998. These wildlife agencies have identified habitat fragmentation and loss of corridors as a significant threat to the long-term survival of the Peninsular population. Since 2012, there have been at least 25 bighorn sheep killed along this stretch of roadway with the majority of deaths attributed to female bighorn sheep that were either pregnant or caring for a lamb at the time they were killed. Bighorn sheep that reside in this area typically access water sources and high elevation to the southwest of Interstate 8 during summer months and attempt to move back across the Interstate to access their lambing and nursery grounds in winter and spring. CDFW, USFWS, and others have extensively monitored and studied this distinct population of peninsular bighorn sheep and identified the need to install directional fencing and a wildlife overpass structure across this section of Interstate 8.

The development of a wildlife crossing and directional fencing along this busy interstate will be a critical step towards increasing permeability for bighorn sheep, mountain lions, and other wildlife in the region.

To advance these efforts, the University of California at Davis Road Ecology Center has partnered with a diverse coalition of stakeholders and experts to develop a plan that will support wildlife movement, fulfill all environmental review requirements, and be feasible to implement.

With additional pressures of water scarcity, increased vehicle traffic, and growing land development, the ability for wildlife to move throughout the landscape is increasingly critical to their survival. This project will lay the groundwork for the implementation of a wildlife crossing that will not only benefit endangered wildlife but will also create a safer highway for motorists. We are hopeful to see some reprieve for the In-Ko-Pah ewe group and respectfully request the Wildlife Conservation Board's consideration and support of this funding request.

Sincerely,

Aimee J. Byard, Associate Director/Biologist
Bighorn Institute

Don Martin, President
California Chapter – Wild Sheep Foundation

John Wehausen, President
Sierra Nevada Bighorn

Corey Thompson, President
Cal-Ore Wetland and Waterfowl Council

Steve Jarvis, Chief Executive Officer
California Deer Association

Lori Jacobs, President
California Houndsmen for Conservation

Fred Harpster, President
Black Brant Group

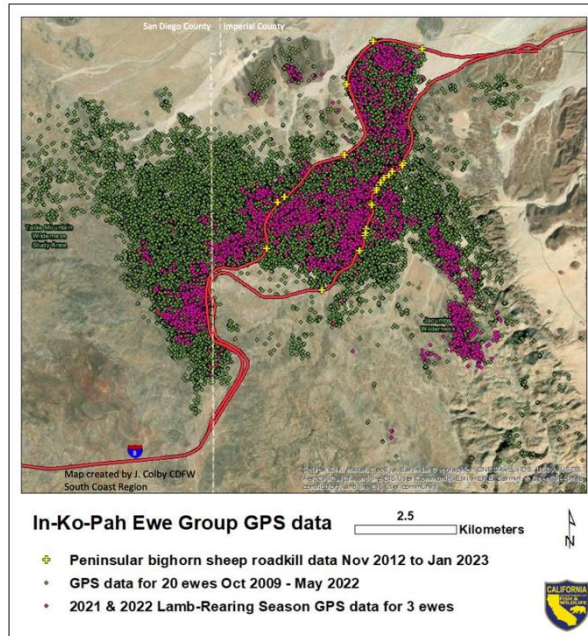
Steve Chappell, Executive Director
Suisun Resource Conservation District

Gary F. Brennan, President
San Diego County Wildlife Federation

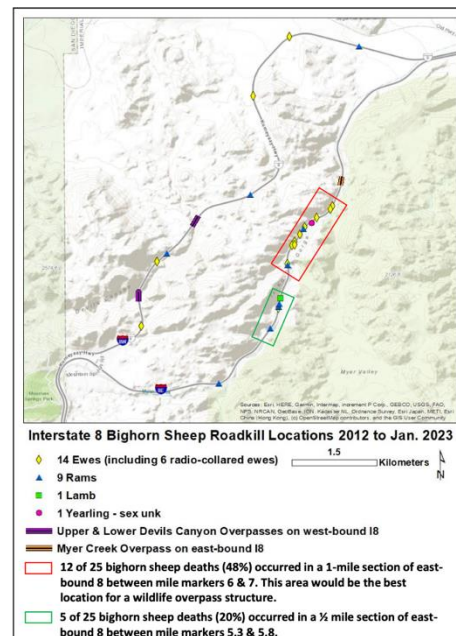
Adam Chavez, President
California Hawking Club

Steve Miller, President
Tulare Basin Wetlands Association

Chriss Bowles, President
California Bowmen Hunters/State Archery Association



Map 1. Since 2009, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has maintained radio collars on a representative sample of the Peninsular bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) population that resides in the In-Ko-Pah Gorge/Mountain Springs area surrounding Interstate 8 in order to study their seasonal movement patterns. Map 1 combines all Global positioning system (GPS) data collected from each GPS-collared ewe over the past 14 years and highlights the 2021 & 2022 lamb-rearing seasons (1 January – May 31). Minimally, 25 bighorn sheep have been killed attempting to cross Interstate 8 since data collection was started in 2012; however, this number is likely low. Bighorn sheep hit or killed by vehicles only gets reported if the motorist's vehicle is disabled and the CHP responds. For example, 33% of radio-collared ewes hit and killed by vehicles were not reported to the CHP and were discovered during regular monitoring activities by the CDFW biologist.



Map 2. Documented locations of 25 bighorn sheep (BHS) killed by vehicles on Interstate 8 between 2012 and January 2023. A wildlife overpass structure (and fencing to guide BHS to the overpass) would be most effective placed somewhere between mile post markers 6 & 7 on the east-bound lanes where the majority of deaths occur (red rectangle). The Myers Creek Overpass on the east-bound side is a low bridge and bighorn sheep do not cross under it. In contrast, the Devils Canyon overpasses on the west-bound side are very tall bridges and bighorn sheep willingly cross beneath them; although they are just as likely to cross the west-bound lanes. Fencing to direct sheep under the Devils Canyon bridges would alleviate the need for a wildlife crossing structure on the west-bound side.