

Colorado Senate Transportation and Energy Committee
Legislative Hearing on the Safe Crossings for Colorado Wildlife & Motorists Act
March 29, 2022
Testimony from David Ellenberger, Senior Associate, The Pew Charitable Trusts

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Winter, Vice Chair Bridges, and other members of the committee. My name is David Ellenberger and I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of SB22-151, the Safe Crossings for Colorado Wildlife & Motorists Act.

I work for The Pew Charitable Trusts, an independent, non-partisan non-profit. For more than 20 years, Pew's U.S. public lands and rivers work has sought to identify and conserve significant public landscapes and wildlife habitat, collaborating with community leaders, government officials, businesses, and other stakeholders to find balanced solutions.

A key focus of our efforts is wildlife migrations, which is an emerging frontier in science with considerable opportunity for states to link science with sound public policy. Colorado has robust populations of migrating wildlife, including mule deer, pronghorn, and the largest elk population in the world. Scientists have recently determined their seasonal migrations to be essential for maintaining healthy and sustainable herds. You may already know that during spring and fall migrations, wildlife-vehicle collisions spike, particularly along rural roads and highways that intersect wildlife corridors.

These collisions can have disastrous impacts on drivers and animals. About 4,000 wildlife-vehicle accidents are reported each year in Colorado – a gross undercount of the actual toll. The collisions cost state residents approximately \$80 million dollars each year in costs related to health care, lost work, insurance, and car repairs; for wildlife, tens of thousands of deer are lost to collisions annually, with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) estimating that more doe mule deer are lost to vehicles than are harvested each year.

The good news, as others have mentioned, is that solutions exist in the form of wildlife-friendly transportation infrastructure, such as underpasses or bridges that, when combined with directional fencing, drastically reduce collisions while providing safe passage for wildlife. Upon completion of an infrastructure project in 2016, along State Highway 9 near Kremmling, wildlife-vehicle incidents declined by more than 90%. Colorado Department of Transportation and CPW have done an admirable job

collaborating on this project and several other win-win infrastructure solutions. Unfortunately, there are dozens of wildlife-vehicle hotspots that need similar infrastructure interventions, but they remain unfunded.

SB-151 would rectify that challenge by creating a fund, the Colorado Wildlife Safe Passages Mitigation Fund, that would provide monies for state wildlife crossing solutions, reducing collisions, and increasing wildlife connectivity. The legislation directs that \$25 million be directed from the state treasury to the state department of transportation for these purposes. This amount would also help the state compete for wildlife crossing funds available for crossings under the federal *Infrastructure Investment and Job Act of 2021*, and it would likely allow for the completion of projects on CDOT's 10-year wildlife crossing pipeline projects list. Featured on that list are projects like the US 550/Billy Creek wildlife underpass in northern Ouray County, which would restore connectivity for elk and mule deer and mitigate one of the top priority wildlife-vehicle collision hotspots identified in CDOT's Western Slope Wildlife Prioritization Study. Pew has contributed funding to help get this project built, but a shortfall still exists, just as there is shortfall for many other worthy projects on the projects list.

The Safe Crossings for Colorado Wildlife & Motorists Act provides a historic opportunity for Colorado to make a down-payment on conserving our cherished wildlife, making our scenic roadways safer for motorists, protecting wildlife populations, and helping local economies where hunting is an important facet of their livelihood. There has never been a better time to prepare our state to maximize federal funding opportunities, and Pew urges the Committee to approve SB-151 and push for its approval by the full legislature.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and welcome any questions. Thank you.

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