



# THE TAOS NEWS

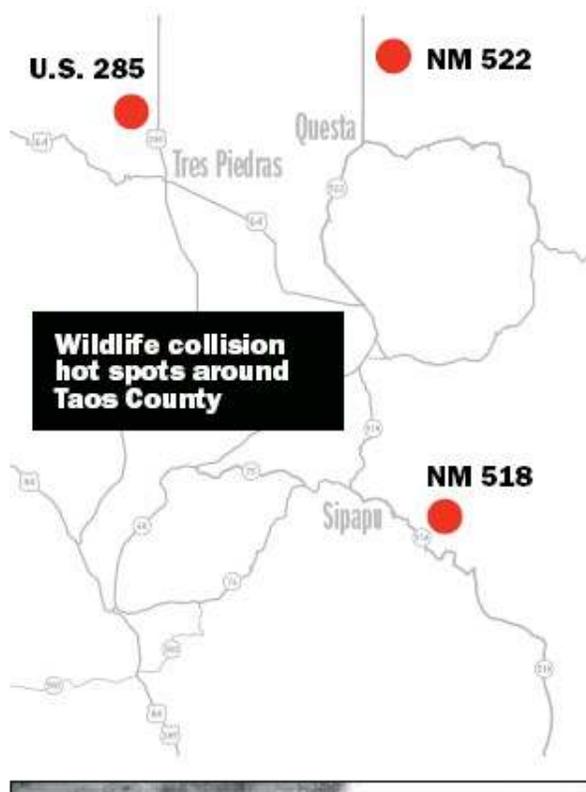
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## Make way for wildlife

### Road planning looks to big game corridors to prevent deadly encounters

By Cody Hooks [chooks@taosnews.com](mailto:chooks@taosnews.com)

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Hardly anything is scarier than driving down the highway — the sun long since dipped below the horizon and headlights piercing only a tiny hole into the surrounding darkness — and coming face-to-face with an elk or deer.

Scary as it may be, such human and wildlife encounters are increasing. The number of people in the West continues to grow and as our roadways get busier, collisions at the junctures with popular animal routes are growing as well.

“Years ago, when highways [had] low traffic volume, these animals could cross without much fanfare. But it’s becoming more difficult for them to go from point A to point B,” said Jim Hirsch, an environmental scientist with the New Mexico Department of Transportation.

“We’re having an impact on big game animals and their ability to move through the landscape,” he said.

In the last year, a flurry of activity on the state and federal levels have brought new attention to the problem of vehicle-wildlife collisions and to the wildlife corridors that stretch across a landscape divvied up among government agencies, tribes and private landowners.

#### Cars and trucks hitting an animal is all too common.

The state transportation department reported that between 2002 and 2016, there were 15,213 animal-vehicle collisions — 1,637 of those happened in 2016 alone, according to information provided by the Wildlands Network.

Aside from the insurance claims, the collisions are costly in another way: of the wildlife collisions from that 14-year period, more than 700 of them resulted in a motorist getting seriously injured or dying.

But the problem isn’t spread evenly throughout the state. Just as humans tend to use the most convenient places to get across the landscape, so do animals. And like humans, animals have their long-established migration routes.

For example, the stretch of U.S. 285 that goes between Tres Piedras and the Colorado border is an area dense with wildlife migration.

A 2016 report by Natural Heritage New Mexico calls the Northern Taos Plateau a “major wildlife movement zone with high elk, mule deer and pronghorn movements.”

The report notes that when it comes to wildlife, “species do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries as they move through the landscape.”

The animals that live on either side U.S. 285 north of Tres Piedras cross more than just a road; they can move between Colorado and New Mexico, between the Río Grande National Forest to the Carson National Forest, between two wilderness areas, between Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management land, and between federal, state and tribal lands.

The complexity of wildlife corridors has led to a movement that hinges on a key concept to bridge the gap between jurisdictions: cooperation.

#### Finding the hot spots around New Mexico

Earlier this year, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed into law the Wildlife Corridors Act.

“We’ll [be] identifying wildlife-vehicle collision hot spots,” said Hirsch. “This will be a statewide effort.”

The new law mandated that the state transportation department and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish team up to create a comprehensive wildlife corridors plan.

After a thorough analysis of data across the two agencies, the plan will identify the areas throughout New Mexico that are most prone to wildlife-vehicle collisions. That analysis will help planners come up with a list of priority projects that can both reduce collisions as well as preserve big game migration routes, said Hirsch.

While the DOT has been dealing with wildlife-vehicle collisions for years, the law is expediting and consolidating the work, Hirsch said.

Hirsch was part of a “very informal analysis” of wildlife-vehicle collisions in 2013. That project relied only on DOT data and was done all in-house. Though it was a “course” study, it still showed that north of Tres Piedras is one of the top spots for such wrecks in the Northern New Mexico area.

The new wildlife corridors law, however, will pave the way for a much more comprehensive analysis using other sets of data; not only will crash reports go into the mix, but so will maintenance logs from when highway workers pick up animal carcasses and information on big game movements from the game and fish department.

The effort to coordinate between the two state agencies is still in its infancy, said David Quintana, the DOT assistant engineer for District 5. An initial meeting happened in late April.

Once the money for the plan is available in July, a consultant will be hired to help wade through the data.

The analysis will help the DOT prioritize projects to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, some of which can run into the millions of dollars.

For example, the DOT completed a project in 2017 to improve big game fencing along the interstate through Ratón, where mule deer and bear are often found crossing. By strategically installing 8-foot-high fencing, they were able to subtly direct animals to cross underneath the road using existing drainages.

“We are seeing a significant reduction in wildlife-vehicle collisions,” Hirsch said. “I consider that a successful project.”

He said the hot spots identified in 2013 “will likely resurface in the wildlife corridor study.”

But considering the “tough topography” of areas like that north of Tres Piedras — flat stretches with few arroyos — “it’s going to be a real head-scratcher to how we address that area,” he said. “It’s not easy, but it can be done.”

### National efforts

The issue is also getting some much needed attention at the federal level as well.

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall is introducing the Wildlife Corridors Conservation Act of 2019 later this week.

If the legislation eventually becomes law, it would prompt federal agencies that oversee federally owned land to designate National Wildlife Corridors while creating

regional councils and a grant program to incentivize states, tribes and private land owners to do projects that improve wildlife connectivity.

“America’s wildlife is in jeopardy, and we are almost out of time to save the planet as we know it. We must act now to conserve wildlife corridors that would save species and mitigate against the mass extinction crisis we are rapidly hurtling toward,” said Udall.

“For hundreds of years, America’s wilderness has sustained our treasured native fish, wildlife and plant species, but this vital part of our national heritage is in crisis due to climate change and other man-made pressures, including the increasing threat of deforestation and habitat loss.”

This is Udall’s second attempt to get the issue before Congress. He introduced similar legislation in 2018 that never made it to a vote.

The legislation builds on other wildlife corridor projects around the country. The Western Governor’s Association started working on wildlife corridors in 2007, and in 2018, former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke directed federal agencies like the BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs and National Parks Service to work with Western states to improve big game migration corridors.

The idea is taking root outside of Washington, D.C.

A recent survey of 400 likely voters in New Mexico found 84 percent of respondents supported increased efforts to protect wildlife migration routes. The survey was sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation, a national conservation nonprofit.

“In New Mexico, our millions of acres of public lands are home to thousands of iconic species ... that could vanish if we fail to take bold action,” said Udall. “We do not have any time to waste.”