Support for Okanogan Wildlife Crossing on Highway 97

To Whom It May Concern,

Approved by voice vote during our October 2, 2018 Board of Directors meeting, the Washington Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) is pleased to support the implementation of wildlife undercrossings on Highway 97 in important habitat for mule deer and other species in Washington’s Okanogan Valley.

To support efforts by the Okanogan Trails Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation to secure private, foundation and other non-governmental funding for the initial wildlife undercrossing on Highway 97 in coordination with the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and other groups, we are pleased to contribute $3,000 from the Washington Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers made out in a check to:

Attn: Chris Branch, Vice Chair
Okanogan Trail Chapter,
Mule Deer Foundation
744 West Ridge Drive
Omak, Washington 98841

When installed in frequently-used migration corridors, wildlife crossings have been proven to support safer passage for mule deer, elk and other animals in Washington as well as numerous other states and countries. North-central Washington’s Okanogan Valley is home to our state’s largest mule deer herd, animals pursued each fall by BHA members and other hunters across our region. Most of these deer are migratory, traveling seasonally from the highcountry of the North Cascades and Okanogan Highlands into lower-elevation winter range in the Okanogan Valley, returning as the snow melts each spring and summer. Highway 97 bisects this critical mule deer migration route, and one particular 12-mile stretch between the towns of Riverside and Tonasket sees more than 350 deer-vehicle collisions each year. Details are available at safepassage97.org.

There is strong local support for wildlife crossings in this area. Unfortunately, public funding has not yet been allocated by the state to resolve this issue despite requests.
The Washington Chapter of BHA is proud to support a public-private collaboration to stem this senseless loss of life—benefiting mule deer, other wildlife, Washington sportsmen and women, motorists and local communities. Our $3,000 contribution exceeds one percent of the total cost to purchase materials for the first Highway 97 undercrossing, proposed for a site adjacent to the iconic Carter Mountain Wildlife Area.

Once the Mule Deer Foundation and partners secure funding for the initial undercrossing, anticipated in late 2018, WSDOT has agreed to provide construction and implementation costs. To carry the momentum from this effort forward, during Washington’s 2019 session of the State Legislature supportive groups including BHA will work with elected officials and agency, business, conservation and community leadership to advocate for funding for additional crossings and fencing to keep people and wildlife safe in this segment of Highway 97.

Sincerely,

Bart George, Co-Chair
Washington State Chapter
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

Max Cole, Co-Chair
Washington State Chapter
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

Chase Gunnell, Conservation Committee Chair
Washington State Chapter
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

Jesse Salsberry
Northwest Outreach Coordinator
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers