

**WildLinks 2025 Conference Summary**  
**October 1-2, 2025**  
**Great Wolf Lodge, Grand Mound, WA**

The 2025 WildLinks conference focused on strengthening the collective infrastructure needed to make connectivity work achievable and durable in Washington State. The conference offered participants an opportunity to celebrate the recently completed Washington Habitat Connectivity Action Plan (WAHCAP), released in June 2025; renew their collective commitment to ecological connectivity work; advance collaborative action on implementation strategies and feasibility needs; and build support for action.

Meeting Sponsors: Conservation Northwest, Jacobs, National Wildlife Federation

**Executive Summary**

The 2025 WildLinks conference brought together state agencies, researchers, Tribal representatives, environmental groups, county representatives, legislative decision makers, and funders to explore the next phase of wildlife habitat connectivity work in Washington. Building on decades of science and collaboration and the recently released [Washington Habitat Connectivity Action Plan \(WAHCAP\)](#), participants focused on ways to make connectivity action feasible, well-resourced, coordinated, and durable across the state.

With the WAHCAP providing a shared, science-based roadmap, a central conference theme was the need to strengthen collaboration. Participants explored whether a renewed structure – potentially through a revitalized Washington Habitat Connectivity Work Group (WHCWG) – could better support the coordination needed across researchers, agencies, and advocates. There was broad recognition that sustained progress will require clearly defined roles, shared governance, and dedicated capacity to support statewide coordination.

Keynote speaker Nova Simpson, Nevada Department of Transportation, encouraged conference attendees to let go of perfectionism, and instead leverage the relative strengths of partners to make progress on workable solutions. Nova, and other speakers from across the country, highlighted common ingredients for success: aligning connectivity with existing policy priorities (e.g., safety, economic and ecological resilience); cultivating champions in agencies, legislatures, and local communities; creating mechanisms to accept private and philanthropic funding; and investing in education and outreach to build long-term support.

Speakers also discussed indigenous-led stewardship, cultural landscapes, and relationship building as important elements of engaging Tribes in wildlife habitat connectivity efforts. Kim Sager-Fradkin, Wildlife Program Manager with the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, described the significant contributions that the

indigenous-led Olympic Cougar Project has had on the understanding of wildlife habitat connectivity, cougar movement, monitoring methodology. Brinn Mari, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, discussed the connection between ecological connectivity and cultural resources, noting that when cultural resources are connected to the use of the land or interactions with the natural world, they become part of large-scale cultural landscapes. Patrick Freeland, Senior Tribal Climate Resilience Liaison with the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, emphasized that effective collaboration with Tribes is grounded in relationships, trust, and respect for sovereignty and timelines. Participants discussed the idea that work to establish relationships must begin before a specific project arises and be supported with appropriate resources, compensation, and co-designed processes.

On the second day, work sessions focused on feasibility needs and the implementation strategies outlined in the WAHCAP. Across science and research, participants identified the need for coordinated, long-term monitoring and data sharing frameworks. Policy and advocacy discussions emphasized building sustainable state-level funding mechanisms, integrating connectivity into existing laws and planning processes, and developing innovative funding mechanisms. Other groups focused on strengthening outreach and communications, aligning management on public lands, and leveraging voluntary conservation incentives on private lands.

Throughout the conference, cross-cutting needs emerged: stable and diversified funding; clearly defined and active spaces for collaboration; intentional, relationship-based engagement with Tribes; and better communication within and across agencies, with decision-makers, and with the public. Looking ahead, WDFW, WSDOT, and CNW will continue to discuss the WHCWG purpose, need, and function. Additionally, discussions about policy and advocacy strategies are ongoing.

### **Day 1: Wednesday, October 1**

The first day of the conference focused on learning. Speakers described the history of connectivity work in Washington; provided an overview of the new WAHCAP and ways to work together, including the Washington Habitat Connectivity Work Group (WHCWG); presented lessons from wildlife habitat connectivity efforts across the country; and shared insights regarding Tribal priorities, engagement strategies, and leadership in Washington. Nova Simpson, Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT) provided keynote remarks. On the second day of the conference, participants applied those lessons and discussed the steps they could take collectively to increase the feasibility of advancing action and support implementation strategies outlined in the WAHCAP. This report provides a summary of the conference, including key themes of discussion, links to resources, and specific next steps identified.

The conference was hosted by Conservation Northwest (CNW), with support from Jacobs Engineering, and the National Wildlife Federation. Jen Syrowitz organized the conference, and Maya Breitburg-Smith

facilitated the conference and drafted the summary. The list of conference registrants is available in [Appendix A](#) of this report.

### **Background: Washington Connectivity History, Introduction to WAHCAP, Introduction to WHCWG**

#### *Washington Connectivity History*

Mitch Friedman, CNW Executive Director, provided background on wildlife habitat connectivity efforts in Washington, including the origins of the WildLinks conference. Partners in the region have been conducting research on habitat connectivity for a long time, generating a significant amount of science and translating that science into projects on the ground. Since 2007, the WildLinks conference has provided a venue for state, federal, and tribal governments; academic institutions; and NGOs to collaboratively explore emerging science and develop ideas for action. Mitch described opportunities CNW had identified to create connections between the Olympic and Cascade Mountains and expressed optimism and enthusiasm for increased progress in the state.

#### *Introduction to WAHCAP*

Glen Kalisz, Habitat Connectivity Biologist at the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and Julia Michalak, Priority Habitats and Species Section Manager at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), introduced the recently completed [WAHCAP](#). They provided an overview of the process to develop the WAHCAP, as well as a summary of key content. The WAHCAP identifies indicators for ten foundational connectivity values in Washington that were synthesized into connectivity maps. Those maps were then used to identify thirteen terrestrial connected landscapes of statewide significance that provide broad connectivity goals for the state. The WAHCAP also includes a set of implementation pathways, which detail specific actions to support connectivity; regional profiles; and long and short lists of priority zones for transportation infrastructure projects based on safety and ecological values. The short list of priority zones includes those areas that offer the greatest potential benefits and are therefore anticipated sites for large-scale, collaborative connectivity projects. The WAHCAP presentation is available online here: [Kalisz and Michalak - WAHCAP Overview.pdf](#)

In response to a question regarding the different ecological and safety priority areas, Glen indicated there was minimal overlap between the two types of priority areas. He explained this was because deer are responsible for most vehicle-wildlife collisions, which flags locations for safety issues. However, ecological priorities are driven by species that might be rarer than deer, have specialist habitats, or avoid human-dominated areas. Additionally, I-5 creates such a significant barrier to wildlife movement that collisions there are limited. Ecological modeling allows the state to identify priority areas that do not have safety issues but would benefit from crossings.

#### *Introduction to WHCWG*

Jen Syrowitz, Senior Manager of Conservation Programs at CNW, highlighted the WHCWG as one way to achieve WAHCAP Goal #4: mainstream connectivity conservation. Connectivity partnerships will need to

create pathways for existing and new plans, policies, programs, and funding. Organizations and individuals will need to support implementation of the WAHCAP. In the past, the WHCWG was primarily a science-based group focused on collaborative development of tools and analyses to identify connectivity opportunities and priorities. Now, the new WAHCAP presents an opportunity to revitalize the group and potentially expand its focus to better support statewide implementation and/or feasibility needs. Leadership from WSDOT, WDFW and CNW are currently discussing the future goals and functions of the group. The WHCWG presentation is available online here: [Syrowitz - WHCWG Intro.pdf](#)

In response to a question, Jen noted the future role(s) of WHCWG remains under discussion. She highlighted the various models for collaboration used in other states, differing in formality and structure, funding sources, and facilitation responsibility. The WHCWG established in 2007 provides a foundation to build on, and over the next year Conservation Northwest, WDFW, and WSDOT plan to discuss the group's structure moving forward. While the WHCWG was previously focused on science, Glen offered that the group's role moving forward was to implement the WAHCAP and address the priorities outlined in the plan.

**Keynote Presentation: Nova Simpson, Wildlife Crossing Program Manager, Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT)**

Nova Simpson, the Wildlife Crossing Program Manager at the NDOT, encouraged conference attendees to let go of perfectionism in connectivity work, noting that constant change, conflicting missions, limited knowledge, and the illusion of control make it unattainable. Embracing partial strengths, stitched together through partnership and collaboration, opens space for resilience, adaptability, and workable solutions. Nova described the process to prioritize projects in Nevada, which includes analyzing vehicle-wildlife collision data, habitat, species status, wildlife movement, and road locations. The projects identified through this analysis may not always align with public priorities, and Nova stressed the importance of prioritizing projects that benefit taxpayers since state agencies work at the behest of the public. Once an initial list of priorities was identified, NDOT then assessed secondary implementation criteria to determine which projects to advance, such as land ownership on either side of a crossing, land use plans, and whether the corridors will provide long term benefits for wildlife given changes and needs associated with environmental instability (climate change).

Nova recognized the significant data available on vehicle collisions in Washington, with collection starting in 1972. She referenced a cost-benefit analysis in a [2019 study](#) demonstrating the impact of including passive-use values (e.g., the public's values for wildlife) when assessing the cost of vehicle collisions. The cost increases further when adjusted for low reporting rates. She suggested that using a more holistic cost framework could strengthen the case for high-cost crossing projects.

Nova concluded with recommendations to increase connectivity project implementation in Washington: identify areas of policy alignment that can increase support for projects; create a mechanism to enable

the state to receive private funding for projects; and build support through education. She celebrated Washington's successful partnerships and achievements to date, and expressed optimism about what would be possible to accomplish in the state in the future. Nova's presentation is available online here: [Simpson - Keynote.pdf](#)

### **Tribal Lands, Indigenous-led Stewardship, FPIC, Tribal Engagement**

Brinn Marri, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, described the connection between ecological connectivity and cultural resources, highlighting the importance of the cultural landscape. She explained that cultural resources are generally the physical materials related to cultural activities. These can be small artifacts or larger scale resources, like the fish, wildlife, land, or plants. Brinn noted that while cultural resources are important and significant on their own, when connected to the use of the land or interactions with the natural world, they become part of larger-scale cultural landscapes. Cultural landscapes coincide with natural landscapes and processes; when either are divided or degraded, they lose important context, knowledge, and modern use. Protecting habitat connectivity and natural resources also helps to protect cultural resources and cultural landscapes. Brinn's presentation is available online here: [Marri - Connectivity, Nature, and Cultural Resources.pdf](#)

Kim Sager-Fradkin, Wildlife Program Manager with the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, discussed the collaboration between multiple Tribes and other partners to conduct the Olympic Cougar Project. While the Tribes on the Olympic Peninsula are distinct and diverse, they have a shared long-term goal of monitoring and managing wildlife populations and preserving intact wildlife habitats for the benefit of the next seven generations; this includes research on cougars and the large, connected habitats that support them and other species that move across the landscape. The project has improved the understanding of cougar movement and overall connectivity on the Olympic Peninsula and advanced survey methodology to understand connectivity. Collaboration among Tribes and other entities on the Olympic Peninsula has enabled the project to deploy wildlife cameras across the landscape and utilize GPS collars. Monitoring data has demonstrated the Olympic Peninsula is isolated and disconnected from other habitat in the region due to the surrounding water bodies and Interstate 5 (I-5); for example, the project has only identified two cougars that have successfully crossed I-5: one crossed and returned again and the other crossed and settled on the other side. The collaboration built through the cougar work now supports additional projects, including a landscape scale elk genetics study between the Olympic Peninsula and the Cascades, modeling connectivity of black bears, deer, elk and cougars, and fine-scale wildlife surveys along I-5 – all of which should contribute data relevant to Washington State's connectivity actions. Kim emphasized that collaboration between the Tribes in the region was essential to the project's success. Kim's presentation is available online here: [Sager Fradkin - Olympic Cougar Project.pdf](#)

During a follow-up question and answer period, Brinn underscored the close connection between cultural and natural resources and the importance of engaging staff from both departments in Tribal governments when working on habitat connectivity.

Patrick Freeland, Senior Tribal Climate Resilience Liaison with the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI), emphasized the importance of building relationships and trust as the foundation for working with Tribal nations and proposed building collaborative networks at the ecoregional scale. Using the process of building a fire as a metaphor, Patrick described steps for building trust – starting with introductions and connections; learning about the values of the people you are working with and the areas of overlap that can spark a commitment to action; identifying resources to support shared action; and eventually increasing the scale of collaborative projects. Like a fire, if work to sustain the partnership stops, it can fizzle out. Patrick also noted that efforts to protect habitat connectivity and cultural landscapes can extend beyond political and jurisdictional boundaries that often define projects or engagements. He recommended using ecoregions to guide the geographic scope of projects, since they often reflect similar ecological communities and human communities. Patrick's presentation is available online here: [Freeland - Relationship Building.pdf](#)

In response to an audience question about engaging Tribes outside of formal processes, Patrick recommended visiting and talking with people working in Tribal government and suggested that being physically present on a regular basis was the best way to engage and maintain relationships. He and other conference participants indicated that it was best to begin building relationships and mutual respect before a specific project or policy need emerges.

#### **Panel: Shared Learnings on Connectivity**

The following panelists shared lessons learned, drawing on their knowledge of habitat connectivity efforts from across the country:

- Nic Callero, The Pew Charitable Trusts
- Logan Christian, National Caucus of Environmental Legislators (NCEL)
- Julia Kintsch, ECO Resolutions
- Kylie Paul, Center for Large Landscape Conservation (CLLC)
- Jeremy Romero, National Wildlife Federation (NWF)
- Nova Simpson, Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT)

During their introductions, panelists highlighted several recent resources:

- [Revenue Options for Wildlife Crossings](#), commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trust and authored by ECONorthwest. This report analyzes how states can generate revenue to build and maintain wildlife crossings.
- [State of the States](#), authored by the Erin Sito with Wildlands Network and Logan Christian with NCEL. This report examines legislation from the past 25 years to identify the key trends and

drivers in connectivity legislation. It also provides examples of successful legislation and opportunities for improvement in existing laws.

- [Integrating Wildlife Habitat Connectivity into Local Government Planning: Examples, Recommendations, and Resources for U.S. Towns and Counties](#), authored by Kylie Paul and Abigail Breuer with the Center for Large Landscape Conservation. This report serves as a practical guide for local planners and partners to incorporate wildlife habitat connectivity into local land use planning and includes sample policy and ordinance language, links to planning and technical resources, case studies, and recommendations and best practices to support local decision-making.
- [Land Trusts and Wildlife Crossing Structures: A toolkit detailing how land trusts can contribute to highway infrastructure projects for wildlife](#), authored by Kylie Paul, Abigail Breuer, and Anna Wearn with the Center for Large Landscape Conservation. This report compiles lessons learned and best practices in action by land trusts engaged in wildlife crossing structure projects.

Following introductions, the panelists responded to a series of questions:

1. Other states have coordinated groups of agencies, Tribes, and stakeholders working together to advance habitat connectivity efforts. Who participates in those groups and how do they operate?

Logan emphasized the importance of coordination inside and outside the legislative process. He described the Maryland coalition, noting it started with basic co-learning to develop a shared baseline of knowledge. Local legislators joined, and in 2025 [legislation](#) formally established the Maryland Connectivity Coalition and its role in state connectivity work. The bill also incorporated connectivity into the comprehensive land use planning processes at the county level.

Julia described the [Colorado Wildlife and Transportation Alliance](#), which grew from a 2017 summit of local, state, and federal government representatives and others interested in wildlife connectivity and vehicle collisions. Following the summit, champions in government and in the state developed the Alliance and engaged external facilitators to help maintain momentum. In 2022, legislation formalized the Alliance's role in state connectivity processes. While the Alliance has received periodic funding from the state, identifying a long-term, permanent funding source has been a challenge.

2. How have you cultivated and tapped into champions to advocate for and advance connectivity policies? What impact did they have?

Nic highlighted the importance of cultivating champions who are knowledgeable about wildlife connectivity issues, effective communicators, and able to advance state action. He described the value that state agency staff can bring as champions, given their ability to speak in detail about connectivity challenges and potential solutions. While agency staff cannot engage in advocacy for specific policies, local NGO champions can amplify messages and act as a conduit to help get legislation passed. State legislators can also be champions for connectivity and may engage in the issue due to interests in

conservation, traditions (like hunting), or human safety. Logan suggested champions draw on resources about successful connectivity action in other states and consider what solutions fit their own context.

3. Funding can be a major challenge to advancing habitat connectivity goals. What are some effective strategies you've seen in other states to identify and secure funds?

Jeremy underscored the role of legislative champions in helping to secure state funding for connectivity projects. For example, New Mexico passed a bill providing a one-time \$50 million injection into the wildlife corridors fund, possible because the state had a budget surplus that year and a champion promoted funding. Other states have utilized trust funds or license plate fees to support projects. He added that while wildlife crossing projects can be very expensive, decision-makers and the public often respond to information about the cost savings and reduced injuries.

As a NDOT employee, Nova indicated there are limits to what agencies can do to secure funding; she finds it extremely valuable when partners approach the agency with potential solutions or some amount of available funding to support a wildlife crossings project.

Nic added that most states no longer have abundant resources to fund wildlife habitat connectivity projects, so it is helpful for partners to come to the table with new funding mechanisms. Examples in use or under exploration include:

- additional fees on car rentals;
- opt-in fees (e.g., hunting or fishing license or vehicle tag renewed);
- taxes on recreational marijuana;
- taxes on tire sales;
- special license plates (with issue specific fees);
- insurance surcharges; and
- establishing accounts that can accept private funding.

4. How have partnerships helped to advance project implementation? Who is involved in those partnerships and what role did they play?

Kylie described how partnerships have helped to advance a Highway 191 project in Montana, including collaboration with:

- the Western Transportation Institute to analyze collision data and identify priority segments;
- the local community to access town funding for crossing assessments;
- the local land trust to secure and protect land for a crossing;
- a local photographer to build public awareness and interest in the development of wildlife crossings; and
- a local music festival (featuring Dave Matthews Band) to raise funds for the project.



Julia noted it can be more challenging to raise funds for projects focused on increasing habitat connectivity (as opposed to reducing vehicle collisions) and suggested that broad coalitions can help with fundraising when there are not state or federal funds available.

The panel then responded to audience questions:

- Prioritization: In response to a question regarding strategies for reaching consensus on a broad range of connectivity priorities, panelists described ways to think about or navigate different priorities. One panelist described realizing a project outside the list of priorities developed through analysis and stakeholder input still had significant value and allowed her team to build new partnerships. Another panelist noted ways wildlife crossing projects designed for large ungulates can also incorporate features, like small fauna cover, that benefit other species of local importance.
- Stakeholder Engagement: In response to a question about ways to get private landowner input and buy-in into the planning processes, panelists recommended building inclusive coalitions and engaging diverse perspectives in efforts to develop habitat connectivity and wildlife crossings projects early in the planning process. State agencies are also responsible for reaching out to stakeholders when developing comprehensive plans or projects in a particular area. Since wildlife crossings are only one component of a connected landscape, it is important to engage private landowners and other land managers to encourage practices that will increase habitat connectivity. An audience member added that grassroots organizing can gain public support for local projects and surface concerns.
- Statewide Conservation Priorities: In response to a question about how to weigh the importance of habitat connectivity work against other conservation needs when resources are limited, panelists suggested engaging diverse coalitions and investigating alternative funding mechanisms (like opt-in fees). Many of the panelists acknowledged that tight state budgets would likely make funding wildlife habitat connectivity projects challenging for the foreseeable future.
- Insurance Companies: In response to a question regarding the ability to engage insurance companies in advocacy for wildlife crossings, Logan referenced proposed legislation in Maryland and Colorado to add a surcharge to insurance fees to fund wildlife crossings and other road safety projects; neither passed. Another panelist added that insurance companies generally have limited incentives to fund tangible solutions that would reduce wildlife collisions.
- Value of Additional Research: In response to a question regarding the value of additional research on habitat connectivity and wildlife crossings, panelists emphasized the importance of robust science to drive project design decisions. One panelist suggested partnerships can help scientists target their research to planners' and decision-makers' needs; another highlighted the value of science in advocacy and public engagement.
- Private Sector Financial Campaigns: In response to a question regarding the possibility of partnering with the private sector to raise funds for wildlife crossing projects, panelists indicated they were not aware of any existing private sector campaigns dedicating a percentage of sales towards projects. An important first step is establishing a dedicated account that could enable the

state to accept funds from diverse sources. Washington State does not currently have an account like this.

### **Additional Question and Discussion**

The first day of the conference concluded with a question and discussion session. Questions relevant to previous sessions have been included in the summaries of those topics above. Additional points of discussion are included below:

- **Wildfires and Wildlife Crossings:** In response to a question about planning for and mitigation of wildfire impacts over key wildlife corridors, Glen indicated that while wildfires are destructive, they do not impact connectivity as much as permanent barriers (e.g., development). Connectivity is temporarily impacted by wildfires, but wildlife often resumes moving through burned areas before full forests reestablish. Julia added that TerrAdapt incorporated wildfire disturbances into WAHCAP modeling. A member of the audience added that, in some cases, fires can increase habitat complexity and benefit wildlife habitat connectivity in the long term.
- **Institutionalized Connectivity Work:** In response to a question about the integration of connectivity work in WSDOT, Glen said that connectivity work is institutionalized at the agency. For example, the agency has policies that integrate connectivity into long-range planning, and staff value the measurable evidence of success, like collision reductions and number of crossings. He noted that the agencies' work is driven by budgets and funding availability, which can constrain project delivery.
- **Additional Needs for Support:** In response to questions about additional opportunities to support wildlife crossing project implementation, participants:
  - Acknowledged that recent federal grant applications had not been successful despite high evaluation ratings and letters of support from numerous government officials. Meeting participants suggested that additional support from Senator Murray, such as a phone call from to the U.S. Department of Transportation administrator, could help.
  - Suggested establishing a dedicated account to accept and hold external funds for wildlife crossing projects. Legislation to establish a wildlife crossing account at WSDOT and a landscape connectivity account for WDFW was not successful in the past two sessions. Glen noted private donors have expressed interest in supporting state connectivity work, but the state struggles to accept funds without the dedicated account.
- **Build Relationships:** A participant highlighted the importance of building relationships with state politicians who may influence the success of federal funding applications or wildlife connectivity legislation. He noted that in some areas of the state, communities are concerned about the movement of wolves or have other concerns about wildlife habitat connectivity efforts; without building relationships with those communities and understanding and addressing their concerns, they will continue to affect the ability to advance action.

## **Day 2: Thursday, October 2**

The second day of WildLinks started with remarks from Ahmer Nizam, Director of Environmental Services at WSDOT, and Margen Carlson, Conservation Director at WDFW. Both speakers emphasized their agencies' commitments to wildlife habitat connectivity in Washington, highlighting the science-driven path forward outlined in the WAHCAP and the opportunities for collaboration and coordination on implementation through the WHCWG. Both speakers expressed their interest in reinvigorating the WHCWG and addressed their agencies' leadership role in the group's future. Ahmer talked about some of the history of connectivity infrastructure at WSDOT and how the I-90 wildlife undercrossings and overcrossing came to be due to pressure and support from the US Forest Service and other partners. He highlighted how partnership work isn't always easy, but it's necessary to get good work done. Margen affirmed that increasing ecological connectivity is the number one strategy to improve biodiversity outcomes, making it a core priority of her agency's work.

### **Work Sessions**

Conference attendees participated in work sessions on the second day of the conference. This included a group of sessions focused on feasibility needs: science, policy, outreach, and Tribal engagement. Another set focused on WAHCAP implementation strategies: transportation infrastructure, public lands, private lands, Indigenous-led stewardship. Participants in both tracks were asked to consider how the activities and intended outcomes aligned with their agency or organizations' existing work and priorities, as well as ways to coordinate across entities engaged in connectivity work.

### **Feasibility Needs**

#### *Policy and Advocacy*

The policy and advocacy group explored how to advance policies, legislation, and public support for wildlife habitat connectivity efforts in Washington. Key themes from the discussions included building sustainable, state-level funding mechanisms, increasing education and outreach to legislators and the public, and cultivating a diverse coalition of advocates.

Participants emphasized that long-term progress will depend on steady funding and institutional support from WSDOT and WDFW. Ideas included establishing dedicated state funding for wildlife connectivity efforts, creating mechanisms to accept private or philanthropic contributions, and adding small user-based fees – such as on out of state vehicle registrations or tire sales – to generate sustainable revenue.

Others noted the potential to integrate connectivity more fully into existing state policy frameworks, such as by amending the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) checklist to explicitly reference wildlife connectivity, reforming elements of the Growth Management Act (GMA) or including connectivity considerations in comprehensive planning. Additional policy ideas included providing incentives for

landowners to maintain working lands that support habitat connectivity and no-hunting buffers near major wildlife crossings.

Participants highlighted education and outreach as essential complements to policy change. They discussed the need to better inform legislators about the scope of ongoing connectivity work and its multiple benefits for safety, the economy, and ecosystems. Suggestions included presentations at legislative work sessions, statewide county tours (modeled after Nevada's Department of Transportation outreach), and creative education programs such as incorporating wildlife-safety content into driver's education courses. Insurance companies could be potential partners—both as advocates for legislation that reduces collisions and as sponsors of driver incentives, such as premium discounts for course participation.

Building a broad coalition was a recurring theme. Participants highlighted the importance of connecting with hunters, recreation groups, and local communities to ground advocacy in shared values such as land stewardship, wildfire resilience, and restoration. Small, visible successes at the community level can help build public trust and momentum for larger projects, while acknowledging and elevating Tribal leadership can help bridge cultural divides and strengthen shared advocacy.

Participants recommended that WDFW and WSDOT expand communication about their ongoing work. This included educating the state democratic caucus about the agencies' connectivity work, highlighting safety and economic benefits, as well as the value of establishing an account that allows the state to accept private funds. Both agencies were encouraged to communicate about connectivity at multiple scales: showcasing landmark projects like I-90, while also demonstrating how smaller community-level actions cumulatively contribute to state-wide progress.

### *Communication and Outreach*

Participants shared innovative ideas for bringing wildlife connectivity into public consciousness, recognizing different audiences need different and compelling hooks. A key takeaway from the discussion was that communication teams and policy teams need to be partners from day one.

Several ideas were focused on increasing public awareness of the dangers of vehicle-wildlife collisions. This included:

- Partnering with WSDOT to integrate wildlife collision footage into Driver's Education classes. Remember that jarring video of distracted teen drivers that's seared into so many of our memories? Imagine replacing it with actual dashcam footage of a wildlife collision showing visceral proof that these crashes threaten both human safety and animal lives.
- Partnering with Waze and Google Maps to alert drivers when they enter wildlife corridors or high-risk zones.

Other ideas were focused on gaining public and legislative support for solutions by illustrating the scale of the problem, such as:

- Staging a dramatic installation of cut-out deer and fawns on the Olympia capitol lawn during legislative session (nothing says "pay attention" like a field of fallen wildlife).
- Developing a traveling exhibition of taxidermized animals representing the staggering toll of highway mortality (the group acknowledged the logistical and financial challenges).
- Displaying a digital counter on the I-90 wildlife crossing bridge tallying every animal that safely crosses.
- Displaying reader boards in high-collision zones showing real-time crash data.

Finally, the group tackled a persistent challenge in conservation advocacy: empowering ordinary people to speak up. Legislators respond to constituent voices, but many people feel intimidated by the prospect of contacting lawmakers. The solution? Provide accessible information, simple tools, and clear talking points that make advocacy feel achievable rather than daunting.

During the work sessions, participants circled back to the same insight: wildlife crossings won't gain traction until the public truly grasps what's at stake, whether through stark visuals, real-time data, or personal stories that bridge the gap between statistics and reality.

#### *Science and Research*

Participants explored the science, data, and methodological needs necessary to advance the implementation of wildlife connectivity plans in Washington State. The discussion touched on strengthening regional collaboration, addressing key data gaps, and improving the use of science and data to inform policy and public engagement.

A shared vision emerged for a regional connectivity monitoring program – a coordinated, cross-jurisdictional effort modeled on the Cascade Carnivore Monitoring Program, but focused specifically on connectivity. The program could enable long-term, broad-scale data collection beyond the capacity of any single agency.

Harmonizing data coordination, storage, and shared methodologies were identified as major opportunities. Participants recommended developing standardized protocols for camera trapping and data analysis, creating an inventory of existing data sources and studies, and ensuring data sovereignty and consent frameworks when collaborating with Tribes and First Nations.

Participants highlighted the need for a coordination framework with clear governance and structure moving forward, while also raising questions about the current role and format of the WHCWG. The group emphasized the need to define the WHCWG purpose and structure explicitly before launching new efforts. Other suggestions included a small, active, committed working group, co-leadership from WSDOT and WDFW, clear task ownership, and sustained funding to support staff time and budgets.

Although Washington is a leader in connectivity science, several research and data gaps remain: fine-scale analyses in suburban and urban areas; population-level effects of connectivity; understudied species; rural development and habitat fragmentation; and cross-border linkages with Idaho, Oregon, and Canada. Recreation was highlighted as an emerging pressure on connectivity, warranting further study through methods such as Autonomous Recording Units, mobile-app data, and partnerships with recreation organizations to encourage stewardship and adaptive management.

Science also plays a vital role in informing policy and behavioral change. Counties need empirical evidence to justify policy and growth management decisions, and behavioral studies could improve driver response to wildlife crossing warnings (which could be improved as well). Visual data – from camera traps and wildlife crossing videos – can be powerful tools for public communication and legislative advocacy.

Persistent challenges include limited funding, inconsistent recreation and road data, and a “proof burden” that requires site-specific evidence before action is taken. Participants stressed that collaboration and governance – including formal joint agency reporting requirements and a revitalized WHCWG – will be key to overcoming these barriers.

#### *Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and Tribal Engagement*

A key theme of the work session was the importance of personal engagement, relationship building, and trust. Participants emphasized that effective collaboration with Tribes begins with personal connections built through respect, presence, and patience – before moving to project or policy objectives. In-person engagement, shared time, and genuine listening are valued and help demonstrate commitment.

Participants noted that outreach to Tribal governments may yield no, slow, or negative responses, which should not be interpreted as disinterest. Slow or negative responses can serve as a positive sign that communication is occurring and there may be opportunities to re-engage differently. Because Tribal governments are often operating with limited staff and resources, engagement must go beyond sending letters or emails; persistence, flexibility, and multiple outreach methods are essential.

Other best practices for Tribal engagement included:

- Engage directly with Tribal Councils and individual Tribes, recognizing each is unique and sovereign.
- Prioritize relationships and cultural understanding over immediate objectives.
- Listen to the needs of a Tribe first, then identify shared priorities. Ask “what can I learn?” before “how can I help?”
- Document and share both successes and failures to strengthen institutional learning.
- Provide funding or compensation to support Tribal participation, and recognize that “Indigenous led does not always mean Indigenous labor.”
- Be patient with differing timelines and avoid extractive engagement.
- Co-design the process as well as the project.

Additional information about best practices for engagement are available in [this resource](#) shared by Patrick Freeland, ATNI.

Participants also discussed the value of institutionalizing appropriate Tribal engagement within state agencies and suggested expanding the role of Tribal Liaisons to include trainings for staff on Tribal engagement to help build organizational understanding, distribute engagement responsibilities, and ensure respectful collaboration is embedded in agency culture.

Finally, participants noted that cyclical “boom and bust” funding periods make sustained partnerships difficult. Stable, predictable funding is essential to maintaining trust and supporting continuous collaboration over time.

### **Implementation Strategies**

In the afternoon, participants continued working in small groups to discuss the implementation actions outlined in the WAHCAP and explored successes and challenges in advancing those actions and ideas.

#### *Tribal Lands and Indigenous-led Stewardship*

The Tribal Stewardship and Indigenous-Led Conservation sessions at WildLinks created space for genuine dialogue about partnership and conservation work with Tribal Nations.

The discussions opened by asking attendees to share their own stories and connections to Tribal communities, which immediately shifted the energy in the room and led to some really honest exchanges. Patrick Freeland's "Building a Fire" analogy from his presentation the day before became a touchpoint throughout the discussions, and his focus on "honor, pride, and respect" as the foundation for partnerships resonated with attendees.

Key takeaways from the discussion included:

- Smaller session formats encouraged more authentic participation and relationship building;
- Opening with personal connections (rather than credentials) changes the tone of discussions;
- Participants want more concrete guidance on building equitable partnerships with Tribal Nations; and
- There's an appetite for ongoing dialogue beyond one-off conference sessions.

The sessions underscored that meaningful Indigenous-led conservation requires us to reconsider how we structure partnerships and center Tribal sovereignty in our conservation work.

#### *Voluntary Conservation Incentives for Private Landowners*

Federal, state, and local voluntary conservation incentive programs can encourage private landowners to protect and enhance habitat connectivity on their property. These programs provide financial support,

technical assistance, and guidance that can help keep lands in forestry, agriculture, and other working uses rather than being converted to development. The WAHCAP identifies several implementation actions that leverage voluntary conservation incentives on private lands to meet state wildlife connectivity goals.

The conversation highlighted both existing tools and emerging opportunities. The Cascade to Coast Landscape Collaborative's [Conservation Program Explorer Tool](#) and the Western Landowners Alliance were cited as effective models for connecting landowners to incentive programs and technical resources. Participants emphasized that successful conservation on private lands depends on relationships and trust – working with landowners collaboratively and locally, rather than through top-down mandates. Many landowners are motivated by a personal connection to their land and a desire to ensure it remains productive and intact for future generations.

Several programs were identified as potential vehicles to advance WAHCAP implementation. Washington's [Voluntary Stewardship Program](#) (VSP) and federal programs like the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) and the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP) can promote long-term stewardship, though participants noted the application process for the NRCS programs can be cumbersome and funding is uncertain. Aligning eligibility and ranking criteria for state incentive programs with WAHCAP goals could improve their connectivity impact.

Participants also discussed proactive approaches to protecting high-value connectivity areas. They suggested analyzing zoning and land-use data (e.g., through the Department of Commerce Zoning Atlas) to identify areas that are at development risk and also have connectivity value. Early engagement with local governments and landowners could then help steer development towards less sensitive areas. Participants acknowledged that voluntary incentive programs often struggle to compete with the financial pressures of development or emerging land uses like solar energy production.

Other ideas included:

- Recognize landowners for their contributions to habitat connectivity in Washington (e.g., Landowner Acknowledgement Day).
- Offer additional tax credits in areas critical to habitat connectivity, ensuring that incentive programs are used strategically.
- Avoid using incentive programs in areas adjacent to highway crossings, where permanent protection is needed.
- While wildlife habitat connectivity on public and private lands are separate issues, the two approaches to implementation must work in tandem to achieve durable connectivity outcomes.

### *Public Lands*

Washington has vast areas of public lands, including areas managed by federal, state, and local entities, that can play an important role in advancing WAHCAP connectivity goals. Discussion in this session



focused on ways to improve coordination, strengthen communication, and align management practices to better support landscape-scale connectivity across jurisdictions.

Participants emphasized that effective implementation will require stronger collaboration broadly across relevant federal and state agencies and in specific landscapes, like agencies managing linkages like the Cascades Crest or Columbia Plateau Backbone. Participants suggested WDFW could help lead by: Convening WAHCAP briefings for agencies managing lands in important landscapes (e.g., National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), State Parks and others) and explore opportunities to collaborate to advance implementation.

Establishing a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) and/or a dedicated interagency working group (potentially under the WHCWG) to clarify roles, provide a space for regular information exchange, sustain collaboration, identify areas of alignment in agency mandates, and clarify roles.

Exploring opportunities to connect to and create alignment with other agencies' planning documents to reinforce statewide connectivity priorities and help advance conservation and connectivity actions.

Cultivating champions at different levels, including within agencies, NGOs, and communities.

Better communication and education – across agencies and with the public – were identified as key needs. Internally, participants suggested many state agency staff, even within WDFW, are unfamiliar with the WAHCAP and its relevance to their work. Regular internal briefings could help to increase awareness, support coordination, and advance shared implementation of the plan. Externally, the National Park Service and state parks could highlight connectivity through interpretive displays and visitor education, helping the public understand how public lands contribute to state connectivity goals. One proposed initiative was a series of kiosks or interpretive materials across parks and wildlife areas illustrating how the areas connect to broader habitat connectivity across the landscape.

During the discussion, participants cited the Carnivore Monitoring Project as a model for successful collaboration. The collaborative project started by identifying the individual needs of all stakeholders, recognizing each agency has its own mandates; taking steps to ensure important voices were represented; and developing a shared definition of connectivity.

Research and monitoring were identified as additional opportunities for coordination, and participants noted agency staff can help researchers coordinate permits or other resources to support research. Participants discussed whether a research working group could be a possible venue for this coordination. Community level support is important for project success; working at the community level should involve engagement to understand and meet local interests when possible. Participants shared examples of ways this has happened, such as allowing communities to access highway crossing structures to increase recreation safety. During the subsequent discussion, questions were raised about recreation impacts, and participants noted USFWS has implemented recreation closures in some areas near crossing structures to reduce impacts. Participants suggested WDFW could provide guidelines regarding the intersection of

recreation and crossing structures, which could help other agencies navigating this issue as well (potentially through the WDFW State, Tribal, and Recreation Impacts Initiative).

### *Transportation Infrastructure*

Discussion in this session focused on the feasibility of developing standalone wildlife crossing projects, one of the implementation actions identified in WAHCAP. Participants discussed the high cost of developing standalone crossing projects and recommended integrating crossing projects into larger construction projects whenever feasible. Integrating projects creates efficiencies in costs like planning, design, mobilization (bringing equipment to the site), traffic control, project management, and staffing, and as a result, the cost of the crossing project is cheaper than if it were to be constructed separately. While the cost of standalone crossing projects can be low in comparison to other WSDOT construction projects, funding decisions require tradeoffs, and it may be easier to get approval for combined projects that create efficiencies.

### **Wrap-up**

The meeting concluded with participants sharing their key takeaways from the session and expressing appreciation for the opportunity to gather and discuss implementation of the WAHCAP.

Looking ahead, over the next few months WDFW, WSDOT, and CNW will continue to discuss the WHCWG purpose, need, and function, from which form will follow. Relevant comments regarding the WHCWG from this conference will be considered in the planning, and an update will be shared when available. Additionally, discussions about the policy and advocacy strategies are ongoing. The next WildLinks will take place in fall 2026 at Great Wolf Lodge, Grand Mound, WA.

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