

Ottawa commits \$1M to protect Banff wildlife

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 10, 2010 7:29 AM



A bull elk on the Bow Valley Parkway in Banff National Park.

Photograph by: Peter Brosseau, Calgary Herald

The massive project of twinning the Trans-Canada Highway through Banff National Park will create 20 new wildlife crossings meant to protect animals from being hit by vehicles.

The federal government announced Friday it will hand over \$1 million over the next five years to a coalition of groups to research the effectiveness of various measures to keep wildlife off the busy highway.

Wildlife crossings have been a staple along the Trans-Canada in the eastern part of the park, and studies into their effectiveness have been ongoing for more than a decade.

Now, research will look at how measures work for different species more common in areas now being twinned, according to Tony Clevenger, a wildlife biologist with the Western Transportation Institute who for 14 years has been studying efforts to reduce wildlife deaths in the park.

"It's really unprecedented what they're doing in terms of the mitigation," Clevenger said of the wildlife crossings and other measures to be deployed along the twinning project.

During the past two years, the federal government has announced \$230 million in funding to complete the twinning of the Trans-Canada through Banff park.

Measures to mitigate collisions with wildlife make for a significant portion of the budget, with Wild Rose MP Blake Richards estimating they comprise one-third of the project cost.

But it's a worthwhile investment, he said, saving the lives of motorists and animals along a heavily travelled highway in an area with a high population of wildlife. "When there's more wildlife, you need to do more to make sure that you're reducing those collisions," he said.

The new research money is heading to a partnership of organizations: the Miistakis Institute for the Rockies, the Western Transportation Institute, the Woodcock Foundation, and the Wilburforce Foundation. The groups are also investing \$700,000 into the research.

The twinning of the Trans-Canada through Banff park is due to be completed in 2012. The new wildlife crossings will involve four overpasses and 16 underpasses, according to Parks Canada.

There are now 24 wildlife crossings stretching from Banff's east gate to Castle Junction. They appear to be working.

Since 1996, more than 200,000 animals have used the structures. During that time, there has been an 80 per cent drop in vehicle collisions with animals, according to Parks Canada.

Two species of particular interest in the areas now being twinned are the wolverine and the Canadian lynx, Clevenger said.

The new research won't just be a before and after comparison of wildlife-vehicle collision numbers. Some of the research will study the genetics of the wolverine to find out whether the highway is proving a barrier to their movements, Clevenger said.

Jim Pissot, with the WildCanada Conservation Alliance, said other issues along the Trans-Canada could be looked at. Speeding, he said, is a significant problem.

Some animals are digging under older parts of the fencing, which could be upgraded with "aprons" below ground, he said. In other places, bears are climbing over, and the fence may need to be tilted.

"Beyond that, I think that what we have on the Trans-Canada is pretty much state-of-the-art," he said.

But he also pointed to other parts of the mountain parks, such as Highway 93 south of the Trans-Canada, where there are significant problems with wildlife being hit by vehicles.

Park officials are looking at Highway 93 south to see what can be done to increase animal safety, according to Kris McCleary, the science manager for the Lake Louise, Kootenay and Yoho field unit.

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