

## Guidance for Evaluating Impacts on Wildlife Movement in LA County

The Department of Regional Planning (DRP) considers linkage of natural areas as one of the most critical elements for maintaining the County's environmental quality and biological diversity. These linkages promote healthy biological populations and increases their resilience against environmental impacts of all kinds, including climate change. Linkage is essential to preserving genetic diversity and maintaining the complexity and functioning of natural communities that provide services for all life. Potential impacts to wildlife movement opportunities are a part of the Department's analysis of environmental impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). We recognize that all wildlife needs to move across various spatial scales in support of regular daily and seasonal activities. In addition, these linkages are necessary for the permanent movements of individuals and potential long-term shifts in species range in response to climate change.

When evaluating impacts to wildlife movement in a heavily populated and extensively developed region like Los Angeles County, it is important to remember that ecologically ideal conditions for wildlife movement rarely exist. Wildlife dispersing or moving between habitat blocks in the County are bound to encounter constrictions and obstacles, both artificial and natural. Yet wildlife are resilient, and in the absence of ideal circumstances, many will utilize whatever movement opportunities exist – navigating through constricted areas and moving around, over, under or through obstacles, when necessary.

Therefore, analysis of potential impacts to wildlife movement cannot rely exclusively on identification and evaluation of the project's impacts to intact or ecologically superior corridors. All potential wildlife movement pathways, including those with existing obstacles and constrictions, such as roads, pipelines, aqueducts, and landscaped or otherwise altered terrain, must be identified and evaluated. The value of constricted or tenuous pathways should not be overlooked or undervalued simply because they are perceived as being rarely used or not ecologically pristine. Doing so ignores the reality that such tenuous linkages and islands of habitat are in many cases the only remaining opportunities available to wildlife in the County.

Biological consultants preparing analyses of project impacts to wildlife movement must consider the existing and post-project opportunities present to wildlife to enter and exit the project site. An adequate assessment of impacts is one that looks at the cumulative impacts of the proposed project in light of existing constrictions and obstacles. When evaluated in this light, a proposed development may actually be able to improve wildlife movement by removing obstacles or including provisions to facilitate safe passage as part of the project.

The standard for wildlife movement analysis entails studies that check for use of possible corridors on a daily basis for a period of three (3) years or more (usually by motion-activated cameras). This is expensive and requires a lengthy period of observation, so most projects will not be doing this kind of study. Analysis will chiefly be conjectural, and it is important that the wildlife movement discussion in biological reports observe this

point, presenting drawbacks and opportunities equally balanced. Los Angeles County will generally regard as insufficient analyses of movement which emphasize what an opportunity is not (e.g., it doesn't provide cover; it is not dominated by native plants; it doesn't get used very often; it is not aligned along a ridge line, water feature, or drainage; etc.). Instead discussion should concentrate on what possible use could occur (e.g. "the culvert is a tenuous connection between useable habitat areas"). Such analyses should include what wildlife would use if the landscape were unfragmented and then consider use under fragmented conditions. If wildlife had a choice, what is the optimal path without the project, and what is the choice under proposed conditions of fragmentation? The goal is to posit the effect of a proposed project on existing wildlife movement.