

Solutions for safety

Citizens group and state move sign, fence to reduce wildlife collisions on I-90

By **PERRY BACKUS**
of the Missoulian

name – the Ninemile Wildlife Movement Area Working Group – and went to work looking for solutions to the persistent problem.

Last summer, the Montana Department of Transportation took their efforts and, more importantly, their ideas to heart.

After hearing the group's recommendations, the department put up a wildlife crossing sign on the highway, removed the large brown sign that blocked drivers' view of the prominent game trail on Cayuse Hill, and reconfigured fencing under a nearby bridge to allow animals a chance to scramble underneath the road rather than take their chances scurrying across it.

Kim Davitt of American Wildlands

See **SOLUTIONS**, Page B2

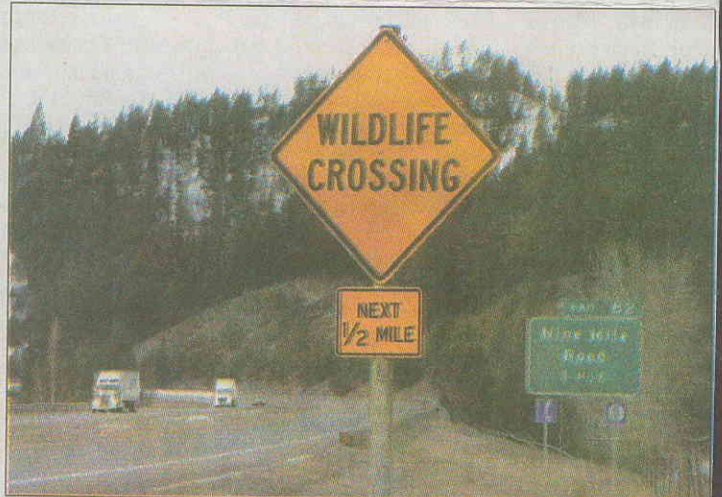
NINEMILE – Cayuse Hill is a killer.

For as long as anyone can remember, wildlife have ventured down a narrow game trail to the edge of Interstate 90, just a few hundred yards short of the Ninemile interchange. Their approach to the busy interstate shielded by a large highway sign, the deer, elk or bear might have paused for a moment before stepping onto the asphalt en route to the other side.

Sometimes they made it. Too often they didn't.

The resulting collisions took their toll in both wild and human life.

Some folks in the Ninemile area noticed the carnage and decided something needed to be done. So they formed a committee with a long-winded



MICHAEL GALLACHER/Missoulian

Warning signs have been relocated along the stretch of highway in an effort to inform drivers of the wildlife hazards without limiting their visibility.

JANUARY 10, 2007

NINEMILE VALLEY

MISSOULIAN



Solutions

Continued

helped the citizens group formulate its recommendations. She couldn't be happier about the Transportation Department's efforts.

"I went out there and was really excited with what I saw," Davitt said. "These are great short-term solutions that are now in place while we look for long-term answers to wildlife connectivity issues there. ... It's a good example of local people getting involved and working together to find reasonable solutions."

Finding ways to safely get critters from one side of the road to the other is becoming an issue for a growing number of people around the state.

"All of us in the past took roadkill for granted without ever thinking about whether there was something we could do," said Transportation Department biologist Pat Basting. "People are starting to pay more attention and looking for some answers."

In the department's Missoula District - which encompasses most of western Montana - there are close to 80 wildlife crossing structures in either the

planning or design phase or already constructed.

Sometimes the work is obvious. The large wildlife crossing structures built along U.S. Highway 93 are a perfect example. No one notices the smaller culverts strategically placed up and down the road that allow smaller critters a chance to escape a fast-moving tire.

And sometimes all it takes is a little finesse to open up other opportunities for wildlife to cross busy roadways.

At Cayuse Hill, the main wildlife trail is just a short walk east of the Ninemile interchange off I-90. For years, a large highway sign for the historic Ninemile Ranger Station inadvertently hid the trail from travelers' sight, which in turn allowed critters to almost make it to the edge of the road before being seen.

At 75 mph, that doesn't give drivers much of a chance to hit the brakes.

The citizens group recommended the sign be relocated and a wildlife crossing sign installed to give people a better chance to react when a four-legged critter suddenly appears.

Basting took their recommendation to his

superiors. After getting their approval, he carried it to Transportation Department maintenance chief Doug Moeller.

"Doug made it happen," Basting said.

Basting didn't stop there. I-90 crosses the Clark Fork River just west of the Ninemile interchange, and bridges can be a perfect spot for wildlife to duck under a busy roadway.

In this case, the right-of-way fence was built right up against the large rocks that lined the edge of the riverbank. The rocks are hard enough to maneuver around on two legs. A four-legged critter doesn't have a chance.

The state received some funding to replace fencing burned in the I-90 fires of 2005, and Basting used some of it to relocate the fence up the hillside near the west end of the bridge last summer.

"Before we did this work, the fence pinched wildlife out," he said. "With the new fence in place, wildlife will be able to walk underneath the bridge any time they want. ... It was a little thing, but an important thing all the same."

The work to provide safe wildlife crossings goes well beyond protecting deer, elk and

other critters hoping to get to the other side.

"There is a real benefit for the public as well," Basting said. "Anytime we can get wildlife off the roadway, it improves public safety."

It doesn't take animals long to learn routes that avoid blaring horns and screeching tires.

"What was amazing on 93 South and 93 North is we had animals using the crossing structures even before we buttoned up the control fencing," he said. "There is a learning curve and it does take them a little bit of time to get used to it. They can adapt pretty quick."

Basting said people coming forward and pointing out problems is an important first step in getting projects in place.

"My hat's off to the citizens group here at the Ninemile," Basting said. "They were people working together to get it done. Hopefully, the road will be safer because of their efforts."