



## Wildlife is meeting innovation in Vail

Five finalist teams in international competition descend on Vail for wildlife crossing inspiration

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Michael McGraw, left, Ryan Buckley, center, and Oliver Osterwind examine the West Vail Pass site for which they will be designing a wildlife crossing overpass. They are part of The Olin Studio team, one of five finalist teams in the North American Wildlife Crossing Structure Design Competition.

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VAIL — How do you get wildlife to cross a bridge over West Vail Pass, on one of the most significant east-west corridors within the United States' interstate highway system?

It's a question that five teams of engineers, landscape architects, ecologists, architects, wildlife biologists and other specialists are trying to answer.

With the first competition of its kind, the ARC International Wildlife Crossing Infrastructure Design Competition's organizers hope innovative ideas will change the way wildlife crossings are built all over North America, not just near Vail.

The five finalist teams met at the Antlers at Vail on Saturday morning to discuss the possibilities and goals for the competition. Expectations among the organizers of the competition are high, and the five teams that come from all over the world are hoping to deliver.

"This competition is going to have huge impacts beyond the borders of the White River National Forest," said Tony Clevenger, the wildlife ecologist who had the original idea for the design competition.

Members from Zwarts and Jantsma, a team that traveled to Vail from Amsterdam, said these kinds of wildlife crossings are popular in the Netherlands. When they heard about the competition, they felt they would fit right in.

"We thought we could bring in some expertise," said Rob Torsing, one of the team's design members.

Sponsors of the competition include the Federal Highways Administration, the Western Environmental Law Center, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service, among others.

Roads without safe crossings for wildlife are not only dangerous to wildlife but also to drivers. Roger Surdahl, of the Federal Highways Administration, said the crossings link and maintain habitats, as well as reduce road kill and protect species.

"A road that goes nowhere to see nothing is a bleak future," Surdahl said. "We look to you, the design teams, for not futuristic designs but designs for the future."

### West Vail Pass

Out of all of the mountain corridors in North America, West Vail Pass, at mile marker 187.4, was chosen because it met very specific criteria for the competition.

Vail Pass is unique in that it's high — 10,000 feet high — and is a major migration site for wildlife. Canada lynx, part of the Division of Wildlife's reintroduction of the animals that began in 1999, have been sighted — and killed by cars — in the area, said Monique DiGiorgio, a conservation strategist with the Western Environmental Law Center.

There's also heavy recreation use on one side of the pass, while wilderness areas exist on the other side, said David Neely, district ranger with the U.S. Forest Service.

"We need to find a way to find these activities to coexist," Neely said. "You guys are able to help us bring

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those competing values into balance.”

Wildlife overpasses are not unheard of in the United States, but Clevenger said there hasn't been much innovation in the 14 years that he's been paying attention.

“All of the overpasses are starting to look the same, and the costs are sky-rocketing,” Clevenger said. “I'm not an engineer, but I think these structures can be built for less and have more innovation.”

DiGiorgio said West Vail Pass is a priority area for the Colorado Department of Transportation and this project could fall under the category of early action mitigation – something that won't take 20 to 30 years to complete like a lot of transportation-related projects typically do.

Dean Riggs, of the Colorado Division of Wildlife, said the project could serve as an example of a way to get people to think about reconnecting with surrounding lands.

The project also could help preserve the part of the state's economy that is largely based on tourism.

“There are two things that bring people to this state – jagged peaks, and secondly, you want to see something on those jagged peaks, the wildlife,” Riggs said.

### A national need

Following the meeting at the Antlers, the five finalist teams, each made up of about four team members, headed to the site to look at the challenges in their upcoming design work.

Torsing was hoping to find inspiration, as his team from the Netherlands is used to designing wildlife crossings in their mostly flat country. The type of wildlife in Colorado is also much different from where they're from.

Members from another finalist team, Michael Van Valkenburgh and Associates, with HNTB, an architecture and engineering firm in New York, said the West Vail location is the perfect spot to put an iconic structure.

The location represents the national conflicts between urban and rural settings, with both people and wildlife, as well as many other conflicts, said Steven Apfelbaum, the principal ecologist for Applied Ecological Services and a member of the Valkenburgh team.

“This is a real platform for addressing a real national need,” Apfelbaum said. “There's a really big opportunity here.”

The winning team will be announced in January at the National Academies' Transportation Research Board's annual conference in Washington and will receive \$40,000. After that announcement, though, there's not necessarily an actual construction phase in sight because funding has not been identified for the project.

That's part of the reason Alexandra Christy, directory of the Woodcock Foundation in New York, one of the sponsors, was in Vail Saturday – she wants to get inspired for a phase 3 of the project, so it doesn't end in January.

Christy said there's already interest from the Museum of Modern Art to showcase the five design models, as well as potential to expand the design work into public education and political campaigns.

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