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Mountain lion's death renews calls for wildlife crossings

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State Senator Fran Pavley addresses a crowd of hundreds at the inauguration event for "Save L.A. Cougars," a campaign to raise money for a wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon in Agoura Hills. The initial feasibility study for the crossing is expected to be released just weeks after P-32 was struck and killed along the I-5. Jed Kim

The death of mountain lion P-32 — struck and killed while attempting to cross the 5 Freeway — has renewed calls for more wildlife crossings across busy thoroughfares in Southern California. Those calls come just weeks before the release of a feasibility study for a widely championed wildlife crossing across the 101-Freeway.

Proponents for the crossing at Liberty Canyon said P-32's fate underscores the need for greater wildlife mobility in the region.

“That cat went through so much and crossed four highways, and yet it was a freeway that did him in, so he was both the poster child for success, and now another poster child for why we need to build crossings to give these cats a chance,” said Beth Pratt-Bergstrom, California Director for the National Wildlife Federation.

P-32 had been trapped and fitted with a GPS collar by biologists who wanted to study how mountain lions are faring urban Southern California. The collar showed he had previously crossed a number of freeways in the 101, the 118 and the 126.

Some of those highways had wildlife crossings, like open culverts. Caltrans has asked scientists with the National Park Service to analyze those crossings to see whether P-32 used any of them.

“We were curious if that animal was using our wildlife crossings and culverts that we’ve installed on other areas, like on State Route 23, State Route 118. Using the GPS tracking, we can determine whether those crossings do in fact work,” said Lauren Wonder, a spokeswoman for Caltrans.

Wonder said no such crossings exist in the area of the 5 Freeway where the lion was struck and killed.

P-32's death has been attracting support for wildlife crossings. Pratt-Bergstrom, whose organization is leading fundraising efforts for the Liberty Canyon crossing, said about \$1500 in private donations were made after the announcement of the cougar's demise.

“It just shows that people want to turn this into something positive,” Pratt-Bergstrom said.

An initial report on the feasibility of a crossing at Liberty Canyon is expected to be released within the next few weeks. The report could include cost estimates for different options, which include a tunnel and a bridge. Estimates for the tunnel have put the cost at more than \$10 million. Estimates for a bridge have not been made but are expected to be far more costly.

Pratt-Bergstrom said more than \$1 million has been raised so far. She expects fundraising efforts will receive a boost once the project report has been released.

The proposed wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon would sit about 25 miles southwest of where P-32 was killed. The crossing would not have benefited P-32 on the day of his demise, but Pratt-Bergstrom said its placement between viable habitat ranges makes it an ideal location.

“You have to have the science. Just because one mountain lion died on the 5, doesn’t mean that a lot of lions are crossing there. But as we’ve seen with the 101 and [National Park Service scientists’] research, we know that this is a place they try to cross, and they consistently keep bumping up and down that corridor,” Pratt-Bergstrom said.