



LAND TRUST

OF SANTA CRUZ
COUNTY

617 Water Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060
831-429-6116
Fax 831-429-1166
info@landtrustsantacruz.org
www.landtrustsantacruz.org

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For Immediate Release: November 4, 2014

Contact:

Calah Pasley
Outreach Manager
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County
831-429-6116
calah.pasley@landtrustsantacruz.org

Mountain Lion Struck and Killed on Highway 17 At Laurel Curve near Future Site of Wildlife Tunnel

Just before 8pm last Thursday night, a young male mountain lion was struck and killed at Laurel Curve on Highway 17. The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County had been keeping tabs on the 4-5 year-old lion since June, as they raise funds to protect 280 acres for a wildlife crossing there.

The non-profit began work on the wildlife crossing project earlier this year, with the protection of 10 acres at the future site of the wildlife tunnel.

The Santa Cruz Puma Project was notified by CA Fish & Wildlife that the body of a male mountain lion was found Thursday night, and the Puma Project worked with the Land Trust to confirm the lion's identity.

Land Trust projects director, Dan Medeiros, said they have been working with Pathways for Wildlife on a camera trap study and corridor design for the past couple of years.

On several occasions, the Land Trust's motion-sensor cameras showed the same male lion walking across the 280-parcel to the east of Highway 17, and across a natural drainage to the site where the tunnel will be built—only to be turned around by traffic on Highway 17.

Just last month, a female mountain lion began showing up on the Land Trust's wildlife cameras to the west of the highway. Biologist Tanya Diamond of Pathways for Wildlife said the male lion may have been seeking a mate in the female lion when he was struck and killed in the southbound lane Thursday.

"Sadly, history is repeating itself" said Medeiros "This wasn't the first time a mountain lion was killed in the vicinity of Laurel Curve, but we hope it will be the last."

Just last year, after a stroll down Branciforte Creek in Santa Cruz, the "downtown mountain lion" was relocated to the Laurel Curve area. A month later, he was struck and killed. A year before that in 2012, a large male lion, dubbed "Atlas" by the Santa Cruz Puma Project, fell to the same fate.

Diamond said 13 lions have been hit on Highway 17 since 2007, most of which were young males. "This is a dangerous pattern," said Diamond. "Every year a mountain lion has been hit and this could be substantially decreasing the genetic diversity of the population."

Chris Wilmers of the Santa Cruz Puma Project has found that the region's puma population already has low genetic diversity and that a population needs at least one young male entering the population and breeding, to maintain genetic diversity.

"We can't bring back the lion that was killed, but we can save other lions by protecting land and getting the tunnel built," said Medeiros. He added, "We do expect another male lion will soon call Laurel Curve its home-range, and we don't want this to happen again."

As part of its Highway 17 Wildlife Crossing campaign, the Land Trust hopes raise \$1,000,000 by the end of the year to protect the 280 acres to the east of Laurel Curve. Campaign details can be found on the Land Trust's website www.LandTrustSantaCruz.org.