

# Hot off the grille

Is California ready to legalize roadkill cuisine?

BY BEN CHRISTOPHER / CALmatters

**Let's get the jokes out of the way first.**

"Meals under wheels."

"Bumper crop."

"Gravel-tenderized meat."

Chances are state Sen. Bob Archuleta has heard most of them. The Los Angeles County Democrat has a bill advancing through the Legislature that would allow Californians to "salvage" recently deceased wildlife from the sides of the state's roads and highways. The eyebrow-raising (and for the squeamish, stomach-churning) effort has been the butt of "many jokes here in the Capitol and even in my own hometown" of Pico Rivera, he acknowledged.

But jokes aside, he insisted, "This bill is dealing with very serious issues."

It would allow outdoorsy and culinarily courageous Californians to engage in a very particular form of road-side dining, so long as they apply for a state permit after-the-fact. Proponents say that wildlife and highway regulators could then use the data to identify roadkill hotspots and help reduce human-wildlife collisions.

It would make California the most populous of a string of states—including Western ones such as Montana, Idaho and Oregon—to permit such highway harvesting.

For progressives, there's the added selling point of not letting good meat go to waste—an argument that has won over many environmentalists and even one of the most zealous of animal protectors, PETA.

While roadkill cuisine may not yet be mainstream, it appears to have joined the ranks of bug eating and dumpster diving as a counter-cultural dietary choice once associated with extreme poverty—but now earning the respect of eco-conscious foodies.

While the bill has no formal opposition and has unanimously cleared the Senate's Natural Resources and Water

Committee, not everyone in the room was won over.

Judie Mancuso, founder of the animal rights advocacy group Social Compassion In Legislation, argued we "should be protecting the animals, not worried about hitting and eating them."

Other groups have raised concerns that the bill could enable poaching, jeopardize traffic safety and lead to food-borne illness.

For decades California law has banned hungry drivers from pulling over to gather bumper-battered wildlife. That's for safety reasons, but it's also an artifact of the state's strict hunting laws. If you want to take a deer out of the wild (or off a highway shoulder), you need a deer tag. No exceptions.

Even so, Archuleta and a coalition of wildlife conservationists and hunting advocates

want to make that exception for only a handful of big, meaty animals including deer, elk and wild pigs. (With apologies to squirrel connoisseurs, all other critters are off the menu.)

Under the proposal, the state would launch a pilot program in 2022 that would allow people who accidentally hit one of those animals, or come across one on the side of the road, to cart the animal home as long as they apply for a free permit within 24 hours. Applicants could file their permit on an app that would also include information on how to properly dress the carcass and avoid foodborne illness. They would also be allowed to "dispatch" animals that have been wounded, but not killed.

At the request of California Highway Patrol, interstates are exempt. □

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