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Lawsuit Challenges Illegal Highway Through Utah’s Red Cliffs National Conservation Area
*Local, State, and National Conservation Organizations Seek to Protect Threatened Mojave
Desert Tortoise, Redrock Landscapes, and Recreation*

WASHINGTON – Today a coalition of six local, Utah-based, and national conservation organizations [sued](#) the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for illegally reapproving the four-lane Northern Corridor Highway through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area near St. George, Utah. Conservation groups filed the lawsuit after receiving information that the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) would be starting ground-disturbing activities for the highway’s construction based on interim authorizations from BLM and despite BLM having yet to approve a required highway development plan for public lands managed by the agency.

The proposed Northern Corridor Highway would carve a high-speed highway through designated critical habitat for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise within Red Cliffs National Conservation Area. It would damage iconic redrock landscapes, disrupt treasured outdoor recreation opportunities, and set a dangerous precedent for congressionally protected public lands across the U.S.

“Preservation of Red Cliffs National Conservation Area is inextricably linked to the quality of life and economic prosperity in Washington County,” said **Stacey Wittek, Conserve Southwest Utah’s Executive Director**. “Our community has repeatedly made clear that better traffic solutions exist and that they oppose a highway through what should be protected lands. Given that UDOT is wasting no time moving forward with ground-distributing activities, we had to act to stop this illegal project.”

Today’s lawsuit, filed by Advocates for the West in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, challenges federal agencies’ January 2026 [reapproval](#) of UDOT’s highway proposal for violating multiple federal laws, including the Omnibus Public Land Management Act, Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, Endangered Species Act, and National Environmental Policy Act.

Abandoning their previous scientific findings, the federal agencies’ recent decision reversed a [December 2024 rejection of the same proposal](#) by the BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service and

marks the eighth time the controversial highway has been considered. The project has been stopped on seven previous attempts over concerns related to wildlife, public safety, legal compliance, and community opposition.

“To continue to push for a widely rejected and illegal highway and expect a different result is a waste of everyone’s resources,” said **Hannah Goldblatt, staff attorney at Advocates for the West and counsel for the conservation groups**. “And once again, federal agencies are complicit in the effort by approving the paving of this congressionally protected, sensitive, scenic landscape. The Northern Corridor Highway not only violates bedrock environmental laws but undermines the integrity of protected public lands nationwide. We won’t let that happen.”

Below are statements on behalf of local residents and Utah-based and national conservation organizations:

“This lawsuit, like the last one, is necessary because our local governments have declined to engage their constituents in an open community dialogue—one that could more clearly define the problem, address its related impacts, and explore alternative solutions that have been consistently ignored. They have left their constituents with no choice, but it’s never too late to talk,” said **St. George resident Tom Butine**.

“When Congress designated Red Cliffs as a National Conservation Area, that was a promise to the American people that this landscape would be protected forever. Allowing a four-lane highway to bulldoze through a congressionally protected National Conservation Area betrays that promise, obliterates the very concept of permanent protection and puts every single acre of America’s protected public lands directly in harm’s way. Today it’s Red Cliffs. Tomorrow it could be any of the millions of acres of protected public lands Americans and rural communities depend on. We won’t let that happen, and we will fight this decision with everything we have,” said **Chris Hill, Chief Executive Officer of the Conservation Lands Foundation**.

“The Red Cliffs National Conservation Area is a shared public treasure that should continue to be managed for the purposes for which it was established by Congress in 2009: ‘to conserve, protect and enhance for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations the ecological, scenic, wildlife, recreational, cultural, historical, natural, educational and scientific resources of the National Conservation Area’ and ‘to protect each species that is located in the National Conservation Area.’ Bulldozing a four-lane highway through this landscape would permanently destroy these irreplaceable resources and deny us the freedom to continue enjoying them,” said **Gregg DeBie, senior staff attorney at The Wilderness Society**.

“Red Cliffs is exactly the kind of landscape Congress intended to protect when it created the National Conservation Area system—spectacular redrock country that provides critical habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise and space for people to experience the quiet and beauty of wild Utah. The Bureau of Land Management’s decision to greenlight a four-lane highway through the heart of this protected area defies both the law and common sense. Utahns have fought for decades to ensure that public lands like Red Cliffs remain intact for future generations, and we

won't stand by while that promise is broken," said **Kya Marienfeld, Wildlands Attorney with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.**

"This is narrow-minded, short-term thinking, and the BLM has clearly caved to local and state political pressure with this decision. It is impossible to square the agency's legal obligation to 'conserve, protect, and enhance' the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area with its decision to approve a new highway through the heart of the NCA. If this project isn't halted it will decimate one of the last strongholds of the Mojave desert tortoises in the mistaken belief that it will shorten commute times," said **Chris Krupp, Public Lands Attorney for WildEarth Guardians.**

"The Trump administration's about-face is cynical and cruel, and this lawsuit shows it's also unlawful. The Bureau of Land Management's decision will allow Utah to bulldoze through a protected conservation area and build another highway feeding urban sprawl. This beloved natural refuge has some of the last best desert tortoise habitat in Utah and was set aside because it's essential for the tortoises to survive and thrive into the future. These public lands should be kept wild and open for fragile wildlife and everyone who loves Red Cliffs," said **Lisa Belenky, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity.**

A History of Rejection:

In a [decades-long fight](#), local residents, conservation organizations, and outdoor recreationists have strongly opposed the Northern Corridor Highway. Despite the immense local opposition, the BLM and Fish and Wildlife Service approved a right-of-way for the Northern Corridor Highway in the final days of the first Trump administration. Conservation groups [sued](#), arguing that the approval violated multiple federal laws.

The case resulted in a [settlement agreement](#) in 2023, which the BLM's recent reapproval violates, and a U.S. District Court decision sending back the project's 2021 right-of-way approval for reconsideration. Agencies acknowledged that the approval did not comply with the National Historic Preservation Act and required additional environmental analysis in light of recent wildfires that further degraded Mojave desert tortoise habitat and native vegetation. After updating its environmental analysis, the BLM again rejected the project in late 2024.

The agency's [2024 Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement](#) found the project would increase wildfire probability and frequency, permanently eliminate designated critical tortoise habitat, spread noxious weeds and invasive plants, and harm more cultural and historical resources than any alternative considered.

In October 2025, the BLM said it would reconsider the application after UDOT argued that the federally endorsed alternative was economically infeasible, despite documented environmental and community costs associated with the Northern Corridor.

In 2021, 6,800 acres west of St. George called "Zone 6," or the Greater Moe's Valley, were added

to the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve as mitigation for the Northern Corridor Highway. Still, Zone 6 includes a popular climbing area and trails on state-owned lands that lack permanent protection. Conservation groups argue that local leaders should more earnestly engage stakeholders and explore permanent protections for Zone 6 without unlawfully sacrificing lands in Red Cliffs National Conservation Area for construction of the Northern Corridor Highway.

About Red Cliffs National Conservation Area:

The 44,724-acre Red Cliffs National Conservation Area is part of the larger Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, which is jointly managed by the BLM, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the state of Utah, Washington County, and local municipalities. The reserve was established under a 1995 Habitat Conservation Plan as a compromise to protect roughly 61,000 acres of public lands for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise while allowing development on about 300,000 acres of state and private land. Congress designated the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area in 2009 to “conserve, protect, and enhance...ecological, scenic, wildlife, recreational, cultural, historical, natural, educational, and scientific resources” of the public lands within the unit.

The region supports key populations of the [threatened Mojave desert tortoise](#) and other at-risk plants and animals, including the Gila monster, burrowing owl, and kit fox. Researchers say the Mojave desert tortoise is on a path to extinction, and its habitat in southwest Utah—which houses some of the densest tortoise populations—is especially vulnerable amid rapid growth in the region.

Located about 45 miles from Zion National Park, the conservation area includes 130 miles of trails, two wilderness areas, heritage public use sites, Native American cultural artifacts, several threatened or endangered species and [one of Utah's most popular state parks](#), Snow Canyon State Park. Visitors come from around the world to hike, mountain bike, rock climb, horseback ride, photograph, and marvel at the expansive redrock landscapes.

Additional Information and Resources:

1. Informational website: protectredcliffs.com
2. [Federal Agency Re-Approves Highway Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, Abandons Own Scientific Findings - January 21, 2026](#)
3. [BLM Again Considering Four-Lane Highway Through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area - October 7, 2025](#)
4. [Decades-Long Highway Fight Ends with Victory for Red Cliffs NCA - December 20th, 2024](#)
5. [Petition to Permanently Protect the Greater Moe's Valley Area](#)
6. [Local and National Organizations Applaud Plan Signaling Denial of Highway Right-of-Way - November 7, 2024](#)
7. [Conservation Organizations Respond to Washington County's Continued Attacks on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area - August 7, 2024](#)

8. [Federal Agencies Release Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on a Highway Right-of-Way Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area – May 9, 2024](#)
9. [BLM and FWS Press Release - November 15, 2023](#)
10. [Report – Washington County at a Crossroads: An analysis of the proposed Northern Corridor Highway project in Southwest Utah](#)
11. [Summary of Desert Tortoise Study in Red Cliffs NCA: Population Trends, Threats to Persistence, and Conservation Significance](#)