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Federal Court Halts Construction of Highway Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area in Utah

Decision Pumps Brakes on UDOT's Rush to Break Ground, which would threaten the Mojave Desert Tortoise

WASHINGTON, DC – Sunday evening, the U.S. District Court [granted a motion by conservation organizations](#) to block ground-disturbing activities associated with construction of the Northern Corridor Highway through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area near St. George, Utah. The court's injunction prohibits the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) from starting construction-related activities that would cause irreparable harm to the threatened Mojave desert tortoise. UDOT insisted on moving forward with these activities as quickly as possible despite uncertainty about its final highway plans and conservation organizations' pending lawsuit that seeks to again declare the highway illegal. In granting the injunction, the judge found that conservation organizations' lawsuit is likely to succeed in showing the highway approval is unlawful.

"We're pleased the court saw through the false sense of urgency by UDOT and Utah politicians to start work on the Northern Corridor Highway through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area," said **Stacey Wittek, Conserve Southwest Utah's Executive Director**. "Starting 'mitigation' work without final approval from the Bureau of Land Management for highway construction jeopardizes community trust while threatening irreversible harm to Red Cliffs and the Mojave desert tortoise. Utah politicians continue to mislead the community and present a false choice between protecting Red Cliffs or Greater Moe's Valley and Zone 6, which only serves to undermine congressional designation of conservation lands and dodge their responsibility to secure permanent protections for Zone 6. Our community and country can have both, and we deserve both."

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.

Despite a [pending legal challenge](#) to the Northern Corridor Highway, UDOT rushed ahead with its plans to install fencing, which would require leveling vegetation and moving tortoises from their critical habitat in the area. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) authorized these activities through interim approvals, but the agency has yet to approve UDOT's required highway development plan.

“UDOT's rush to break ground on an illegal highway threatens permanent harm to the population of Mojave desert tortoise that U.S. Fish and Wildlife considers to have the greatest influence on the resilience of the entire recovery unit,” said **Hannah Goldblatt, staff attorney at Advocates for the West** and counsel for the conservation groups. “When the Northern Corridor Highway is ultimately rejected as it has been seven times before, the damage would be done. Taxpayers and the local community would be left holding the bag—financially and environmentally—for harmful work that could have been avoided.”

Pursuant to the Court's order, the case will proceed towards summary judgment briefing expeditiously. The injunction will remain in place until this case is resolved.

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.

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. These acres are only temporarily protected; the Zone 6 agreement is set to expire in 20 years, and the Utah Trust Lands Administration can pull out of the agreement at any point without legal repercussions. 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.

Conservation groups' 2021 lawsuit resulted in a [settlement agreement](#) and a U.S. District Court decision sending back the project's 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 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.

Abandoning their previous scientific findings, the BLM and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [reapproved](#) the Northern Corridor Highway in January 2026. The decision reverses federal agencies' December 2024 rejection of the same proposal 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.

Conservation groups [sued](#) in January 2026, challenging federal agencies' 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.

Additional Information and Resources

1. Informational website: protectredcliffs.com
2. [Lawsuit Challenges Illegal Highway Through Utah's Red Cliffs National Conservation Area - February 4, 2026](#)
3. [Federal Agency Re-Approves Highway Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, Abandons Own Scientific Findings - January 21, 2026](#)
4. [BLM Again Considering Four-Lane Highway Through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area - October 7, 2025](#)
5. [Decades-Long Highway Fight Ends with Victory for Red Cliffs NCA - December 20th, 2024](#)
6. [Petition to Permanently Protect the Greater Moe's Valley Area](#)
7. [Local and National Organizations Applaud Plan Signaling Denial of Highway Right-of-Way - November 7, 2024](#)
8. [Conservation Organizations Respond to Washington County's Continued Attacks on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area - August 7, 2024](#)
9. [Federal Agencies Release Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on a Highway Right-of-Way Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area – May 9, 2024](#)
10. [BLM and FWS Press Release - November 15, 2023](#)
11. [Report – Washington County at a Crossroads: An analysis of the proposed Northern Corridor Highway project in Southwest Utah](#)
12. [Summary of Desert Tortoise Study in Red Cliffs NCA: Population Trends, Threats to Persistence, and Conservation Significance](#)