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**Federal Agency Re-Approves Highway Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, Abandons Own Scientific Findings**

*Coalition of Local Residents and State and National Organizations Vow to Continue Decades-Long Fight*

**St. George, UT** – The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) [re-approved a proposal](#) from the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), at the behest of Washington County, for the construction of a four-lane Northern Corridor Highway through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area near St. George, Utah. Today's decision reverses a [December 2024 rejection of the same proposal](#) by the BLM and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and marks the eighth time the controversial highway has been considered. The project has been halted on every previous attempt over concerns related to wildlife, public safety, legal compliance, and community opposition.

"This is a deeply disappointing decision for our organization and for the thousands of community members who have continually voiced their opposition to the highway," said Stacey Wittek, the Executive Director of Conserve Southwest Utah. "But the fight to protect Red Cliffs National Conservation Area is far from over. We are carefully assessing every available option to protect this important and iconic land for future generations."

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

BLM'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.

“Despite BLM’s 2024 findings, Washington County and UDOT continue to push for an illegal highway while ignoring past promises to protect Red Cliffs National Conservation Area,” said Wittek. “The idea that rock climbing, mountain biking, and other cherished recreation in the Greater Moe’s Valley can only be protected if the Northern Corridor Highway is approved is simply false. Local elected officials can decide to decouple the two issues, and commit to engaging stakeholders in finding ways to protect Greater Moe’s Valley and follow through on promises to protect Red Cliffs.”

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

“This is a very disturbing decision. The pollution, lights, and noise will significantly reduce my quality of life. It also sets a precedent that public lands are open for development. I am highly disappointed in BLM for this reckless decision,” said **Mary Jo Vilicich, Green Springs Neighborhood resident.**

“I don’t understand how the BLM can move forward with a highway when the agency has already acknowledged how harmful it would be. The Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement stated an increased risk of wildfires. A lot of us already struggle to get home insurance because of fire danger, and I honestly worry it’ll become impossible if the highway is built,” said **Ken Bouvier, Green Springs Neighborhood resident.**

“Today’s decision is a major misstep by the BLM, which is doing the bidding of Utah politicians insistent on punching a broadly opposed and illegal highway through protected public lands. We won’t stand idly by while BLM blatantly ignores its own scientific findings and a Congressionally-mandated requirement to manage Red Cliffs National Conservation Area for conservation and recreation,” said **Hannah Goldblatt, staff attorney at Advocates for the West** and counsel for conservation groups.

“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 **Charlotte Overby, Vice President of Conservation Field Programs for Conservation Lands Foundation.**

“The Bureau of Land Management’s decision to reverse itself is a disastrous mistake. Bulldozing a highway through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area would destroy some of the last best habitat for threatened desert tortoises and forever scar this rare natural refuge,” said **Lisa Belenky, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity.** “We’ll keep fighting this

high-speed roadway because it's both unlawful and unwise to sacrifice important wildlife habitat on our protected public lands for more urban sprawl."

"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,'" said **Gregg DeBie, senior staff attorney at The Wilderness Society.** "Bulldozing a four-lane highway through this landscape would permanently destroy these irreplaceable resources and deny us the freedom to continue enjoying them."

"Even after a long history of analysis and rejection by federal land managers, the ill-advised Northern Corridor Highway proposal seems to return every few years," said **Kya Marienfeld, Wildlands Attorney at the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.** "Continuing the crusade to build a highway in a Congressionally-designated conservation area is not only illegal, it is—after more than a decade of failed attempts—downright foolish. But these public lands, and the critical habitat and cultural sites they contain, are too important to abandon, and the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and our members remain committed to protecting them."

"It's pathetic that state and local politicians want to put a highway through the Red Cliffs and ruin what is an astonishing asset for all of us, but especially for the people of Washington County," said **Chris Krupp, Public Lands Attorney for WildEarth Guardians.** "It's even worse that BLM is bending over backward to endorse the scheme. So we'll keep fighting for the Red Cliffs, regardless of how long it takes to overcome this short-sighted plan for the highway."

"UDOT and Washington County have for years refused to engage their constituents in open discussions on issues with their proposed solution to anticipated future traffic congestion and on alternative solutions that would protect both Red Cliffs National Conservation Area and the Greater Moe's Valley Area, which the county proposed as mitigation," said **Tom Butine, Washington County resident.**

### **A History of Rejection**

Today's decision overturns the most recent federal rejection of the Northern Corridor Highway in a [decades-long fight](#) led by local residents, conservation organizations, and outdoor recreationists to block the highway. The Northern Corridor proposal has been rejected seven times since 2006, when local residents first raised concerns about routing a highway through protected public lands.

Despite 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, including the Omnibus Public Land Management Act, Endangered Species Act, National Environmental Policy Act, National Historic Preservation Act, and others.

The case resulted in a [settlement agreement](#) in August 2023 and a U.S. District Court decision sending back the project's 2021 right-of-way approval. 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.

In October 2025, the agency 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.

#### **Background on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA):**

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 red rock landscape.

#### **Additional Information and Resources:**

1. Informational website: [protectedredcliffs.com](http://protectedredcliffs.com)
2. [BLM Again Considering Four-Lane Highway Through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area - October 7, 2025](#)
3. [Decades-Long Highway Fight Ends with Victory for Red Cliffs NCA – December 20th, 2024](#)
4. [Petition to Permanently Protect the Greater Moe's Valley Area](#)

5. Local and National Organizations Applaud Plan Signaling Denial of Highway Right-of-Way – November 7th, 2024
6. Conservation Organizations Respond to Washington County's Continued Attacks on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area – August 7th, 2024
7. Federal Agencies Release Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on a Highway Right-of-Way Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area – May 9th, 2024
8. BLM and FWS Press Release, November 15th, 2023
9. Report – Washington County at a Crossroads: An analysis of the proposed Northern Corridor Highway project in Southwest Utah
10. Summary of Desert Tortoise Study in Red Cliffs NCA: Population Trends, Threats to Persistence, and Conservation Significance