



Conserve
Southwest
Utah

Setting the Record Straight on the Proposed Northern Corridor Highway through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA) and Desert Reserve (Reserve)

FICTION: The proposed highway was promised in a piece of federal legislation passed 15 years ago – the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009.

FACT: The 2009 legislation only states that in developing a travel management plan for the NCA, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must “identify 1 or more alternatives for a northern transportation route in the county.”

The legislation expressly omits any requirement or mandate that the BLM designate such a corridor. This does not limit the BLM’s identification of an alternative route to one that is located within the Red Cliffs NCA – it must only consider a route “in the county”.

Scientists and policymakers have rejected proposals for a highway through Red Cliffs at least six times since 2000. Taxpayers have invested over \$20 million to conserve the land which is now proposed to be developed as a highway.

FICTION: The proposed highway is legal, conservationists are just trying to slow this down.

FACT: A highway through Red Cliffs is illegal. The 1995 Mojave Desert Tortoise Habitat Conservation Plan (signed by Washington County, USFWS, BLM, State of Utah, and Ivins City) stipulates no new roads in Red Cliffs Desert Reserve; nor is new road construction allowed in NCAs.

The proposed highway violates at least five federal environmental protection laws: the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Administrative Procedure Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act.

Violations of these laws were central to the successful litigation filed by conservation groups, which has led the BLM to reconsider its decision to approve a highway right-of-way in the NCA. This process is underway right now.

FICTION: The proposed highway would not set a precedent for road construction in National Conservation Lands, which are considered to be the “crown jewels” of the American West.

FACT: New roads are prohibited in NCAs. Building one through Red Cliffs would open the door to potential road construction across the country in or near other National Conservation Lands, such as Vermillion Cliffs, Grand Staircase-Escalante, and many others.

To learn more go to conserveswu.org.



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FICTION: The proposed road is necessary to meet future traffic needs in our community and for economic growth.

FACT: There are better, cheaper alternatives for a highway that meet future needs and protect recreation opportunities, wildlife habitat, and cultural resources, according to the Bureau of Land Management's 2021 Final Environmental Impact Statement. St. George and Washington County can have both – smart economic growth and an intact Red Cliffs NCA.

FICTION: If the highway isn't approved, we lose Zone 6 and it will be developed.

FACT: Roughly half of Zone 6 is managed by the BLM and is permanently protected. Even if the highway isn't approved, it is not a foregone conclusion that Zone 6 would be removed from the Reserve. And even if Zone 6 lands were removed from the Reserve, it is not a foregone conclusion that the non-BLM lands in Zone 6 (Utah Trust Lands) would be developed.

Washington County rightly recognizes that the Zone 6 lands are worthy of protection. However, Zone 6 is not a bargaining chip and adding these lands to the Reserve does not justify destroying a different area of the same Reserve with a four-lane highway.

FICTION: The proposed highway is better for the endangered Mojave desert tortoise.

FACT: It would plow through the center of one of the most important, high-density clusters of Mojave desert tortoises in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit, affecting over 350 adult tortoises, besides juvenile tortoises. The tortoises have less habitat to call home if a highway is built.

The area in and around the Red Cliffs NCA experienced a tortoise population decline of 41% between 1999-2019 — even more than the tortoise's range-wide decline — and recent wildfires devastated nearly 25% of tortoise habitat within Red Cliffs. The proposed highway route turns the NCA into a wildfire tinderbox, putting multiple species at risk. Taking away more habitat will only make it tougher for this endangered species to stabilize and eventually recover.