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15 May 2018

The Honorable Rob Bishop
Chairman
House Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Raul M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Opposition to Congressman Chris Stewart's "Desert Tortoise Habitat Conservation Plan Expansion Act, Washington County, Utah" (H.R. 5597)

Dear Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations from across the nation **we strongly oppose H.R. 5597, the "Desert Tortoise Habitat Conservation Act,"** and urge you to do the same. H.R. 5597 would establish a 4-lane highway in the heart of a National Conservation Area and prime Desert Tortoise Habitat. H.R. 5597 would also establish a dangerous and damaging national precedent-- ignoring the will of the constituents, bypassing prior agreements with no public engagement, ignoring science and implementing an ineffective solution to our growth challenges.

H.R. 5597 greatly impacts the people in and around St. George, Utah, which sits in the midst of unique and spectacular public lands and the habitat of the threatened desert tortoise. In 1995, the Fish and Wildlife Service developed a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the desert tortoise. The plan was a pragmatic approach to both protect the desert ecosystem and open 300,000 acres to growth and economic development. Residents and local officials wanted more certainty that lands around St. George would be protected. After 5 years of collaboration the Red Cliffs National Conservation (NCA) was established in 2009. The NCA and HCP overlap, helping to protect critical habitat for the desert tortoise and open space for St. George residents and tourists.

This legislation forces a four-lane highway corridor through the heart of both the National Conservation Area and prime desert tortoise habitat, a dangerous precedent that could impact

protected areas across the nation. This construction would be in violation of the HCP established under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). It also does not make logical sense to locate the highway in the proposed region, as there are alternatives that studies show would have a great impact on resolving traffic issues that avoid these protected areas but have not been explored through the Regional Transportation Plan.

For these reasons, we strongly urge you to oppose H.R. 5597 and continue to manage these public lands the way local citizens support and in the national interest, rather than for short term private gains.

Sincerely,

Tom Butine, Board President
Conserve Southwest Utah

Ed LaRue, Board Member
Desert Tortoise Council

Danielle Murray, Senior Legal and Policy
Director
Conservation Lands Foundation

Phil Hanceford, Conservation Director
The Wilderness Society

Ashley Sotysiak, Utah Chapter Director
Sierra Club

Nora Apter, Legislative Advocate
Natural Resources Defense Council

John Bellmon, President
Utah Audubon Council

Hilary Shugart, President
Briderland Audubon

Heather Dove, President
Great Salt Lake Audubon

Ethan Aumack, Executive Director
Grand Canyon Trust

Steve Erickson, Director
Citizens Education Project

Jen Beasley, Legislative Director
Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

Ryan Beam, Public Lands Campaign
Center for Biological Diversity

Chris Gorzalski, South West Utah Leader
Great Old Broads for Wilderness

Chris Krupp, Public Lands Guardian
Wild Earth Guardians

Henrietta Stern, President
Fort Ord Recreation Trails Friends

Jaina Moan, Executive Director
Friends of Gold Butte

Alex Johnson, Executive Director
Western Slope Conservation Center

Patrick Nolan, Executive Director
**Friends of Organ Mountains Desert
Peaks**

Jon Kelly, Board of Directors
Dolores River Boating Advocates

Tanya Henderson, Executive Director
Amargosa Conservancy

Susan Greiner, Board member
Friends of Browns Canyon

Amy Cauthon, Executive Director
Friends of Yaquina Lighthouses

Drew Stephens, Founder & Board of Directors
Puente Institute

Tricia Gerrodette, Board Member
Friends of San Pedro River

Nicole Croft, Executive Director
Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners

Donna Stevens, Executive Director
Upper Gila Watershed Alliance

Meg Foley, Executive Director
Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve

Tim Dwyer, Executive Director
Friends of the Upper Missouri Breaks Monument

Sharon Baur, Board President
Friends of Arizona Joshua Forest

Tim Flood, President
Friends of Agua Fria National Monument

William Thornton, Vice President
Friends of Ironwood Forest

Anabella Bastida, Executive Director
The Council of Mexican Federations in North America

Neil Havlik, President
Carrizo Plain Conservancy

Christina Huff, Secretary
Lost Coast Interpretive Association

Howard Hunter, Board Member
Friends of Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument

Peggy Chaikin, President
Save our Ancient Redrocks

Mary Keslan, Secretary
Friends of Sloan Canyon National Monument

Diane McBride, Executive Director
Southwest Colorado Canyons Alliance

Meagan Fitzgerald, Member
Friends of Sonoran Desert

Jim Boone, Founder
Friends of Basin and Range National Monument

Braidan Weeks, Strategic Engagement Specialist
Utah Dine' Bikeyah

Wendy Schneider, Executive Director
Friend of the Inyo

Ryan Henson, Policy Director
California Wilderness Coalition

Jamie Stuve, President & CEO
Loxahatchee River Historical Society

Bret Hewitt, Executive Director
Tuleyome

Laura Cunningham, California Director
Western Watersheds Project

Kevin Emmerich, Director
Basin and Range Watch