

What is Zone 6?



- Zone 6 is approximately 6,800 acres of land that would be added to the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve in exchange for severe damage caused by the Northern Corridor Highway fragmenting the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve/Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA).
- Located west of Bloomington and Sunbrook, Zone 6 is an approximately 6,800-acre satellite area not connected to the rest of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.
- Zone 6 is approximately 40% SITLA land (State of Utah School and Institutional and Trust Lands Administration) and 60% BLM and BLM-ACEC land (Bureau of Land Management-Area of Critical Environmental Concern).
- Zone 6 is home to many conflicting uses: major competitive sporting events, grazing, target shooting, OHV, ATV and dirt bike use, illegal dumping, and more.
- Zone 6 is also home to the threatened Mojave desert tortoise. 78 live tortoises were found here in a 2017 survey by Washington County that used very different survey protocols than those used to count tortoises in the rest of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.
- Biologists estimated a density of 22.5 tortoises/km² in Zone 6 which suggests that this area should have been protected when the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve was first created in 1996.



Over half of Zone 6 lands are already protected for conservation by the BLM in an Area of Critical Environmental Concern. The Bear Claw Poppy non-motorized trail system, home to the endangered Dwarf Bearclaw Poppy and popular with mountain bikers, falls within the boundaries of the proposed Zone 6.

Zone 6 is not a good trade for the Northern Corridor

- Zone 6 fails to mitigate (lessen the severity of an unpleasant action) for damage caused to the 9 resource values the Red Cliffs NCA was congressionally-designated to protect. These include ecological, wildlife, scenic, recreational, natural, cultural, historical, educational and scientific values.
- Zone 6 also fails to mitigate for damage caused to the threatened Mojave desert tortoise. The Northern Corridor Highway would destroy approximately 153-acres of critical tortoise habitat in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit (UVRRU), one of 5 tortoise recovery units in the west. The UVRRU, where Red Cliffs is located, is the smallest, most at-risk and most successful Mojave desert tortoise recovery unit.
- Biologists have determined that a highway's Road Impact Zone extends to as much as 4,250 meters on each side of the road. This means that the approximately 5-mile long Northern Corridor Highway would impact, to some degree, at least 15,000 acres of critical tortoise habitat.
- At 19.6 tortoises/km², the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit has a much higher density of tortoises than the other 4 recovery units. The next closest density is 10.3 tortoises/km² in the Chocolate Mountains of southern California. All other conservation areas range from 1.9 to 5.6 tortoises/km².

- This highway would be devastating to the most robust remaining population of Mojave desert tortoise on earth, jeopardizing recovery efforts for a species that was emergency-listed as “threatened” in 1989 and has been declining rapidly in the last 30 years due to continued habitat loss, wildfire and disease.
- Habitats in the NCA are already stressed by recent wildfires that contributed to a 41% decline in tortoise population. This vulnerable population needs to be proactively protected, not confronted with a new impact.
- The 4-lane highway would fragment critical habitat, forming a barrier that would prevent tortoises from traveling to lands they need to forage, reproduce and shelter.
- Direct impacts from the highway include mortality during construction, habitat fragmentation, degradation and loss, spread of exotic and invasive plant species like cheat grass, increased risk of catastrophic wildfire, subsidized raven populations and increased predation, increased risk of poaching and vandalism, and more.
- Indirect impacts that degrade habitat would extend out to at least 4,000 meters or 13,000 feet on each side of the highway. These impacts include loss of soil crust, increased erosion, changes to and loss of dominant vegetation communities, and changes to the way water flows across the landscape.
- The 50 tortoises found in a September 2018 pre-survey of the highway and buffer zone would have to be translocated to another area. Translocation is a risky practice with some success and some failure.
- The Red Cliffs NCA needs to be proactively managed for tortoise conservation to offset the losses caused by development and displacement of tortoises on lands surrounding the NCA. To put a highway through this conservation area is to break a promise of conservation and upset the balance of the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan.

Zone 6 is already protected

- The tortoises who live in Zone 6 are already protected under the Endangered Species Act. The Endangered Species Act applies to both SITLA and BLM lands, making it illegal to “take” or harm tortoises.
- If SITLA land was sold in the future, biologists would be required to survey the land, remove tortoises, and translocate them.
- Half of the land in Zone 6 has an additional layer of protection from conservation management associated with its BLM-ACEC designation.

SITLA lands in Zone 6 are not in immediate danger

- SITLA’s mission is to generate revenue for the trust, including Utah schools, by leasing or sell their lands for oil and gas, mining, surface, and real estate development.
- However, the soil and topography of SITLA lands in Zone 6 makes them largely unsuitable for development. In northern portions of the SITLA land, the terrain is very hilly with large rocky outcrops, deep washes, canyons, and gravelly, cobbly soil. In southern portions of the SITLA land, terrain is characterized by highly-erosive, gypsum-rich, “badlands” soil types of the Moenkopi formation that support endangered Dwarf Bear Poppy and Holmgren Milkvetch populations.
- The amount of SITLA land adjacent to Zone 6 that is suitable for housing development is small, and much of it is already taken by the DiVario Development. The difficult terrain and soil make development cost-prohibitive, dangerous and unappealing, meaning that these lands are at the bottom of the list for developers.
- Other possible uses for SITLA lands in Zone 6 include mining of sand and gravel. SITLA has allowed a small amount of landscape gravel to leave Zone 6, but has declined other proposals because of promises to made to the recreation community.
- There is no immediate pressure to sell SITLA lands in Zone 6.

- Members of the avid climbing and biking communities, government agencies, and groups like Conserve Southwest Utah could work together to protect the SITLA land in Zone 6 by helping to facilitate trades with the BLM or by creating a preserve similar to the White Dome Nature Preserve on the UT/AZ border.

Concerns with Management of Zone 6

- Why was Zone 6 not included in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve to begin with? Given the life expectancy of tortoises, the adults in Zone 6 were there when the Reserve was established and should have been included.
- Zone 6 is very popular with rock climbers, mountain bikers, and hikers. The BLM estimates that Zone 6 lands are one of the most heavily recreated locations in the county. The Bearclaw Poppy Trail Systems and the Green Valley Gap Area received 31,000 visits in 2018, or about 84 visits per day.
- Zone 6 is also very popular with motorized recreation, including dirt bikers and OHV (off highway vehicle) users. Scars from off-trail riding cover much of the land.
- Illegal dump sites and target shooting debris are common on SITLA lands in Zone 6, and there is a decades-long history of using the land as an illegal dumping ground and location for bonfires.
- Zone 6 hosts large-scale sporting events like the True Grit Epic Mountain Bike Race that bring in an estimated \$10-12 million of economic impact to Washington County. These competitive mountain biking events bring an additional 3,000 visitors to the land, not including spectators.
- How will these existing land uses and major events be managed alongside the goal of threatened species recovery?
- What is the budget for Zone 6, including fencing, maintenance, interpretation, and other associated costs?
- How would the future Western Corridor that runs along the western border of Zone 6 impact this land? What development pressures would be exerted on the tortoise after this highway is built?
- How would the extensions of Navajo Dr. and Green Valley Dr. shown in the Dixie MPO's 2019-2050 Regional Transportation Plan (both of which would fragment Zone 6) impact this land for tortoise recovery?

