



The Utah Department of Transportation, at the behest of Washington County, is applying to the Bureau of Land Management to build the Northern Corridor Highway in the heart of the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA).

This would severely damage Red Cliffs NCA, negatively impact the public's experience on these lands, threaten cultural sites, and set a dangerous precedent for National Conservation Lands elsewhere in Utah and throughout the country.

### **Background on the Lands**

The Red Cliffs NCA makes up 75% of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. The Reserve is collaboratively managed by BLM, the State of Utah, Washington County, and other municipalities to protect the threatened Mojave desert tortoise, scenery, and recreation. It was established in 1996 as part of a grand compromise to protect 60,000 acres of public lands for the desert tortoise while opening up 300,000 acres of private lands for easy development.

Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA) was designated by Congress in 2009 to further protect these public lands. Red Cliffs NCA includes approximately 45,000 acres of public lands located in south-central Washington County. The Pine Valley Mountains and Dixie National Forest are to the north and the communities of Ivins, Santa Clara, St. George, Washington, and Leeds surround Red Cliffs NCA to the south-west and south-east.

This is where the Mojave Desert, the Great Basin, and the Colorado Plateau meet. Because of this convergence, these public lands uniquely include animals and plants from each of the three regions.

The tortoise may have been the original catalyst for protecting these lands over 20 years ago, but the value and benefit of Red Cliffs NCA is far reaching. It adds to our quality of life and our economy. It protects cultural and historical resources like petroglyphs. It is a place that is enjoyed and explored by many.

Because these public lands are just 45 miles from Zion National Park, visitors come from all over the state, country and world to visit Red Cliffs NCA. Economic data<sup>1</sup> from 2013 highlights that the total

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<sup>1</sup> 2013 economic data is included in the Red Cliffs NCA Resource Management Plan.

economic output from visitors to Red Cliffs NCA is \$3 million. This figure will undoubtedly be higher now as visitation has increased over the years.

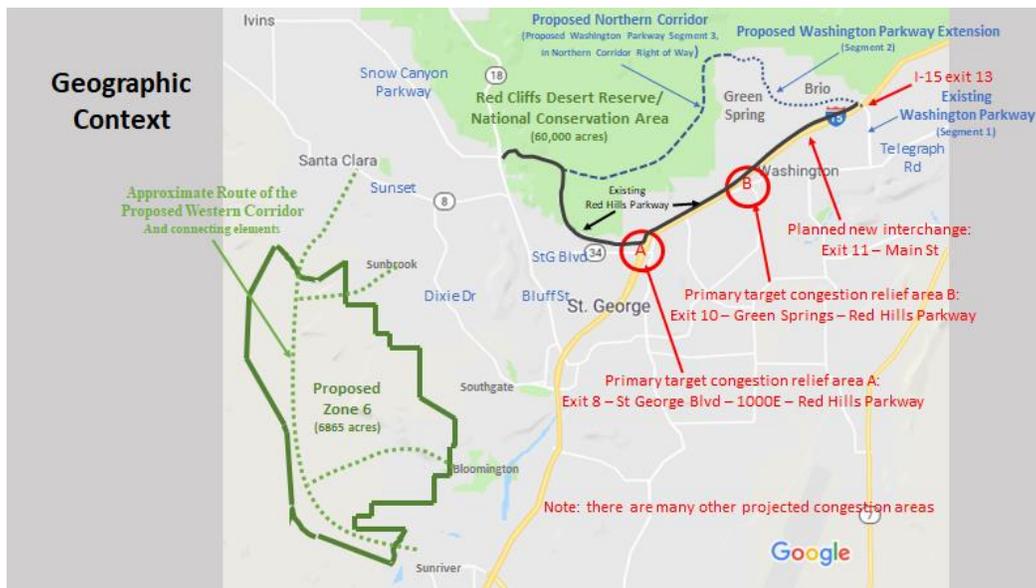
They are often struck by the area’s beautiful red rock cliffs and basalt formations as well as spectacular views of the Pine Valley Mountains. Red Cliffs boasts 130 miles of trails, two wilderness areas, the Red Cliffs Recreation Area, the Red Cliffs Campground, and heritage public use sites. These lands are enjoyed by hikers, mountain bikers, rock climbers, and equestrians.

### Background on the Threat

The Northern Corridor is a proposed highway through the protected Red Cliffs National Conservation Area. This would be the second highway on these protected lands; there is already a four-lane highway (Red Hills Parkway) that bisects Red Cliffs NCA. This highway was in place before the lands were designated and was included as part of the compromise agreement to protect the lands while opening up other places for development.

The proposed Northern Corridor highway would run east-west through Red Cliffs NCA. It would start as one lane in each direction and may expand to as much as three<sup>2</sup>. It is estimated that by 2040, 32,000-46,000 cars will travel on this route each day.

The proponents of the Northern Corridor highway have billed it as including two unrelated segments (Segment 2 is outside the NCA and Segment 3 is inside the NCA). However, as the map below illustrates, there’s only moderate utility in building Segment 2 without Segment 3.



The effort to develop the Northern Corridor is led by Washington County and the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), which is the lead agency seeking federal approval for the highway. The County

<sup>2</sup> <https://washingtoncity.org/publicworks/2013TransportationMasterPlan9-26-14web.pdf> (see page 32)

has tried, unsuccessfully, to push this highway through six times previously since 2006 in the following ways:

- 2006 - As part of that year's federal lands bill.
- 2007 - Attached to an Environmental Impact Study for the Red Hills Parkway expansion.
- 2009 - During the drafting of that year's federal lands bill.
- 2015 - During the drafting of the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area Resource Management Plan.
- 2016 - Through an appeal of the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area Resource Management Plan.
- 2018 - Through federal legislation introduced by Rep. Chris Stewart (R-Utah) and Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah).

UDOT, acting for the County, is currently pursuing a seventh attempt at getting approval for the Northern Corridor highway. UDOT requested permission to build the Washington Parkway Extension (Segment 2) from the Federal Highway Administration, and construction will begin soon.

For Segment 3 (which would be on protected public lands within Red Cliffs NCA), the project proponents are pursuing a number of different avenues to secure approval for the development. The BLM and U.S. Fish and Wildlife are currently conducting an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) to understand the implications of building a new highway through Red Cliffs NCA.

UDOT, at the behest of Washington County, is applying to the Bureau of Land Management for a Right of Way to build the Northern Corridor Highway. The Bureau of Land Management is being asked to analyze the impacts of this highway. They are facing enormous pressure to grant the Right of Way and write the highway into administrative plans that determine how these lands are protected, managed, and used. This includes the following:

- **Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan** - The Habitat Conservation Plan was put in place 20 years ago when the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve was created. It was a grand compromise that protected over 60,000 acres of important public lands and in turn opened up 300,000 acres of private lands for easy development. The Plan expired in 2016 and efforts are currently underway to renew it. We expect to see the Northern Corridor addressed in the draft updated plan.

The inclusion of the Northern Corridor in the Habitat Conservation Plan has a domino effect of impacting other public land management plans. For example:

- The project proponents are advocating for changes to be made to the **National Conservation Area** to allow for a utility corridor and a four-lane highway. Building a high-speed, four-lane highway through a National Conservation Area would be precedent setting for this region and for National Conservation Lands throughout the state and country.
- In addition, the County is seeking to make changes to the Bureau of Land Management's **St. George Field Office Resource Management Plan**. They have proposed adding land (referred to as Zone 6) to Red Cliffs NCA as mitigation for the damage that the highway causes. Zone 6 is

abused and discontinuous habitat that is currently used for off-highway vehicle (OHV) and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) riding, dumping, and target shooting. It is also slated for major highway development.

### **The Impact of a Highway**

We expect the impacts of building a Northern Corridor highway through Red Cliffs NCA to be serious and far reaching.

First, there will be significant impacts for the many people who enjoy exploring the public lands of Red Cliffs NCA. The Northern Corridor highway would fragment the T-Bone trail and impact the popular Pioneer Hills and Pioneer Rim trail system in the Red Cliffs NCA. Over 10,000 visitors explored these trails in 2018, enjoying hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding.

In addition, the highway (including Segments 2 and 3) would be less than one mile from 14 other trails in Red Cliffs NCA, including those that lead to designated wilderness areas and the peace, quiet and solitude protected there. It is expected that by the year 2040, 32,000-46,000 cars would travel on this route each day. The highway would add noise, lights, air pollution, litter, and more - drastically changing the experience of spending time in the beautiful expanse that is Red Cliffs NCA.

Second, over 260 archaeological sites have been found in Red Cliffs NCA - and only about 12 percent of the land has been surveyed for such occurrences! We don't know exactly how many cultural sites are located in the path of the Northern Corridor Highway, however, in 2018 we found a large petroglyph panel in the highway route and there are likely other sites nearby.

Third, a decision to build a highway through already protected public lands would be precedent setting for our country. If it can happen in Washington County, it can happen in other regions in Utah and, frankly, throughout our country. It puts at risk America's National Conservation Lands (of which Red Cliffs NCA is a part) as well as long established laws and agreements such as the Endangered Species Act.

Finally, we are deeply concerned by the way in which this process is taking place. We are aware that the development of a highway through Red Cliffs NCA is part of a larger trend to sell-off public lands to development. One of the key ways this is taking place around the country is through administrative planning processes (such as is happening with Red Cliffs NCA through the Habitat Conservation Plan and the two resource management plans for Red Cliffs NCA and St. George Field Office).

These planning processes are complex and not enough public attention is being shed on what's at stake for the American people. In the case of Red Cliffs NCA, input from the public was suppressed by a short 30-day window to submit comments and the complexity of the three different elements being considered.

### **Our Call to Action**

Along with its conservation partners, Conserve Southwest Utah (CSU) has proposed alternative solutions to the highway and supports the original agreements that designated and protected these lands. We believe

that there are alternative ways of relieving traffic congestion that would not require sacrificing quality of life and damaging the Red Cliffs NCA.

We invite you to learn more about the Northern Corridor highway. We also ask that you encourage your family and friends, inside and outside of Utah, to participate in BLM's next comment period which is scheduled to begin on **June 12, 2020**. This is not just a local or regional issue. It is precedent setting and will impact public lands that people come to see from all over the state, country, and world.

To learn more about how to participate in public comment periods like these, community members should visit [conserveswu.org](http://conserveswu.org).