



For Immediate Release

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Public comment period closes as advocates sound the alarm about the misuse of funds to build a highway in Utah's Red Cliffs National Conservation Area

St. George, UT - A 90-day public comment period closes today on the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Northern Corridor Highway Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) at a time when local conservation advocates are sounding the alarm that BLM is proposing to misuse dollars from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) for its preferred highway route.

More than 35,000 comments have been submitted over the course of the entire review process to date. BLM is proposing to build a four-lane highway through Utah's Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA), established to protect critical wildlife habitat for the threatened Mojave desert tortoise and 20 other species, biodiversity, world-class recreation, stunning scenery and the local economies that depend on and are growing from these assets.

"There's absolutely no good reason to build a highway through Red Cliffs, especially when there are alternative routes outside of the protected area that BLM's own analysis shows are better at reducing traffic," said Tom Butine, Board President of St. George-based Conserve Southwest Utah.

"BLM has used over \$20 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to acquire land for Red Cliffs National Conservation Area under the auspices of outdoor recreation, conservation and wildlife habitat. However, their current preferred highway route crosses these lands, which is contrary to the intent and permissible uses of LWCF," said Todd C. Tucci, senior attorney for Advocates for the West, a public interest law firm working with Conserve Southwest Utah.

"We're taking a hard look at what this means for the viability of their proposed route."

Recent wildfires devastated nearly 25% of desert tortoise habitat within the Conservation Area, providing a stark example of the increased risk of catastrophic wildfires a highway and related development would create within Red Cliffs in the future.

In June of this year, BLM released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on the Northern Corridor Highway. The DEIS analyzed the Northern Corridor Highway's impacts to Red Cliffs NCA and alternative transportation routes. The public had 90 days to submit comments. The Bureau of Land Management is now expected to issue a Final Environmental Impact Statement in the months ahead.

"If the BLM continues with their current plan and preference for a highway inside the NCA, we'll definitely protest, using all avenues," said Tom Butine, Board President of Conserve Southwest Utah.

Background on the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF):

LWCF is a federal program that invests a portion of revenue from offshore drilling toward protecting land, water, and recreation areas for all Americans. Full and permanent funding for LWCF was recently signed into law by President Trump as part of the Great American Outdoors Act, which garnered bipartisan support.

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About Conserve Southwest Utah (CSU):

CSU is a non-profit coalition of citizens advocating for conservation of the area's natural resources (our public lands, our water and our air) and cultural resources (the remnants of indigenous and pioneer activity) and for the Smart Growth principles that enable conservation for the benefit of present and future generations. To learn more, visit conserveswu.org.