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Contact: Tom Butine, 425-893-9781, tom@conserveswu.org

Sarah Thomas, 435-590-8172, sarah@conserveswu.org

**TRUMP ADMINISTRATION DECISION TO BUILD HIGHWAY IN UTAH VIOLATES ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS AND RISKS INTEGRITY OF NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS**

**St. George, UT –** Today, the Trump Administration’s Bureau of Land Management [issued a Record of Decision](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/1502103/200341977/20032928/250039127/News%20Release%20-%20ROD%20Publication.pdf) permitting construction of the Northern Corridor Highway, a controversial four-lane highway through the protected Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA) in southwest Utah. The US Fish & Wildlife Service also issued an Incidental Take Permit, allowing for destruction of desert tortoises in the path of the highway project and to reduce protections elsewhere. Desert tortoises are listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

These decisions are the latest attempts by the Trump Administration to unwind long-standing protections for public lands and wildlife.

Local and federal stakeholders agreed 25 years ago that Red Cliffs NCA would be permanently protected as a wildlife reserve in exchange for allowing development on 300,000 acres of land outside the protected area. A highway through Red Cliffs violates the NCA’s Congressionally-mandated purpose: to protect recreation opportunities, habitat for sensitive and vulnerable wildlife, and cultural resources.

Conserve Southwest Utah (CSU) has led local and national efforts to protect Red Cliffs from the highway, and to develop transportation alternatives. In December 2020 CSU and the Red Cliffs Conservation Coalition [issued a 114-page protest](https://conserveswu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PROTEST.pdf) of the Bureau of Land Management’s Final Environmental Impact Statement for the highway. The protest asserts that building the highway through Red Cliffs NCA violates several federal laws, including the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

“This decision by the Trump Administration was fully expected, and Conserve Southwest Utah and coalition partners have long been prepared for next steps,” **said Tom Butine, President of CSU’s Board of Directors.** “Not only does building a highway in Red Cliffs NCA break major federal laws, but there are viable and affordable transportation alternatives outside of Red Cliffs that the Bureau’s own analyses have identified.”

“Yet the agency continues to stand behind the option that’s bad for local residents and wildlife,” **continued Tom Butine.** “The Trump Administration and County officials have rushed this process forward and ignored significant public opposition every step of the way. Now it's our turn - we will do everything we can to stop this highway from destroying this special place that is vital to our quality of life and an important draw for our local economy.”

The Bureau of Land Management’s analysis showed alternatives outside of Red Cliffs NCA do a better job of relieving traffic congestion and protecting wildlife, scenic beauty, and local access to trails. One of them, named the Red Hills Parkway Expressway, would allow cars to travel from east to west across northern St. George, connecting Red Hills Parkway to I-15, dodging trouble spots, improving traffic flow on existing roads. CSU argues that alternative routes are a better use of taxpayer money because protecting Red Cliffs preserves this economic engine for the county.

“This is the beginning, not the end, of the fight to protect the world class recreation, open space and Mojave desert tortoise habitat provided by the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area,” **said Todd C. Tucci, senior attorney for Advocates for the West, which is representing the Red Cliffs Conservation Coalition.** “We look forward to convincing President-Elect Biden—and a court, if needed—that Secretary’s Bernhardt’s plan to punch a 4-lane highway through this desert paradise will not protect, restore and enhance these irreplaceable recreation and conservation values.”

In addition to issuing a protest, CSU has also requested the Bureau fulfill its duty to adequately assess the impact of [last years' wildfires](https://conserveswu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Request_for_Supplemental_DEIS_following_fires.pdf), address the [illegal use of the Land and Water Conservation Fund](https://conserveswu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/House-Natural-Resources-Committee-Letter-on-LWCF-Red-Cliffs-Purchases.pdf), and conduct a [proper cost-benefit analysis](https://conserveswu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/NCH-Alternatives-Cost-Estimate-Issues-Letter-with-Attachment.docx). None of these requests have been addressed.

“Red Cliffs NCA was established in 2009 to safeguard iconic landscapes, recreation opportunities, and species such as Washington County’s iconic Mojave desert tortoise, which is protected under the Endangered Species Act,” **said Sarah Thomas, CSU’s** **Public Lands Program Director.** “This decision will damage popular hiking, biking and equestrian trails, cultural resources including a beautiful petroglyph panel, and critical habitat for 20 species of sensitive and threatened wildlife including the desert tortoise.”

See below for additional statements opposing this effort.

**Kya Marienfeld, Wildlands Attorney, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance:**

“This approval is not only devastating to the ecologically-rich Red Cliffs NCA and the species who depend on this important habitat, but it also sets a dangerous and troubling precedent: that federal public lands specifically set aside for conservation purposes and all agreements and exchanges made in reliance on these protections can be completely undermined or—literally—paved over on a whim.”

**Danielle Murray, Senior Policy and Legal Director, Conservation Lands Foundation:**

This is a fight for the integrity of America’s National Conservation Lands. If we allow construction of a highway through Red Cliffs NCA, what’s to stop development in all the protected places we care about? This would set a dangerous precedent for National Conservation Lands and we will fight to overturn it with everything we have.”

**Phil Hanceford, Conservation Director, The Wilderness Society:**

“This attempt to build a highway through such a beautiful and important area will not stand. National Conservation Areas are not the places for this type of industrial development. These lands were protected to ensure conservation and recreation opportunities into the future. We will take action to stop this last ditch effort by the Trump administration as they are on their way out the door.”

**Randi Spivak, Public Lands Director, Center for Biological Diversity:**

“Greenlighting a multi-lane highway through protected conservation lands purchased with taxpayer money is disgraceful and illegal. The Trump administration’s appalling 11th-hour move will destroy some of the last remaining habitat for threatened Mojave Desert tortoises in Utah and make a mockery of public lands protection. Destroying protected wildlands and wildlife for a highway that will encourage more urban sprawl is the last thing we should be doing in an extinction crisis.”

**Kevin Emmerich, Co-Founder, Basin and Range Watch:**

“National Conservation Areas are Congressionally-designated to conserve and manage public lands to benefit present and future generations, not to simply set aside space for future highways and other infrastructure. A highway in the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area would push imperiled species like the desert tortoise further towards extinction and create a permanent visual eyesore in one of the most scenic regions in Southwestern Utah.”

**Chris Krupp, Public Lands Guardian, WildEarth Guardians:**

“Congress designated the Red Cliffs NCA for a reason: to protect the desert tortoise—as well as the beautiful but fragile landscape it inhabits—from rapidly encroaching sprawl. BLM’s decision to permit the Northern Corridor Highway flies in the face of the very purpose of that designation. The highway will deface the Red Cliffs landscape, further batter a declining tortoise population, and ultimately result in greater sprawl and traffic congestion for the people of St. George.”

**Vera Smith, Senior Federal Lands Policy Analyst, Defenders of Wildlife:**

“BLM’s decision puts politics over science, and the embattled Agassiz’s desert tortoise is collateral damage.The clock is ticking for this species and we need habitat more than highways that will eviscerate critical conservation areas. Defenders of Wildlife will continue to oppose this highway and fight for the Agassiz’s desert tortoise before it’s too late.”

**Background on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area:**

Red Cliffs National Conservation Area is within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve and is collaboratively managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the State of Utah, Washington County, and other municipalities. It was established in 1996 as part of a grand compromise to protect 62,000 acres of public lands for the Mojave desert tortoise (listed as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act), while opening 300,000 acres of private lands for development.

These spectacular public lands are 45 miles from Zion National Park, include 130 miles of trails, two wilderness areas, heritage public use sites, and overlay Snow Canyon State Park. People from all over the state, country and world visit to hike, mountain bike, rock climb, and horseback ride.

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