

# Written Testimony

By Dr. Bill Mader

To the Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Hurricane, Utah Hearing, April 22, 2024

First, I'd like to thank the Subcommittee on Federal Lands for allowing my written testimony.

My name is Dr. Bill Mader. I am a resident of Kanab, Utah. I lived in Washington County for 14 years. I was the first Administrator of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. I retired as an Associate Professor at Navajo Tech University in 2019 where I taught the upper division environmental science courses and guided students to advanced degrees.

I am here today to talk about why the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve must be saved from the disastrous Northern Corridor Highway.

Please understand that I was there, in the “arena” as Teddy Roosevelt would have said. I personally signed the request for the incidental tortoise take permit to the USFWS in 1995. I helped co-write the original 20-year Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). I wore out boots attending countless public meetings. I helped remove tortoises from designated Take areas. I was on the public team that developed the recreation plan. I know what happened. I know what the written commitments were.

So, let's take a moment and step into a time machine. The time in Washington County was 1994 and uncertainty, tension and chaos reigned. The life blood of cities is development and a threatened species – the desert tortoise – was stopping development. The 1995 HCP agreement saved our local cities and Washington County from sinking into chaos. The establishment of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve brought a much-needed degree of economic certainty by allowing hundreds of acres of tortoise habitat to be destroyed outside the reserve. The deal was simple. It allowed cities to develop land outside the reserve, but not *inside* the reserve.

It is hard for people now to imagine how tense these times were, how failure was knocking at the door. Some people wanted the plan to fail. A reporter asked me why I'd taken a job that wouldn't exist in 6 months. U.S. Senator Robert Bennett called me at home – yes at home – to see how things were going. Some of us here in the County made a trip to Washington D.C. and personally met with the Assistant Secretary of the Interior to tell him our solution would work but that we needed the Interior Department's help.

The written agreement for the Reserve was not perfect. A great many people worked to make it successful. Some, including key landowners, are gone now. It was all about making the deal happen and seeing things happen on the ground: fixing boundaries, doing land deals, clearing take areas outside the reserve for tortoises, and implementing the recreation plan.

When I walk in the Reserve now, I take nothing for granted because I remember those tough times.

Here are the indisputable facts:

- A highway through Red Cliffs was never included in any long-range reserve planning documents because, even in the early 90s, it was understood that a highway through the reserve would be catastrophic. The 1995 HCP agreement was reached after tough, extensive public processes, interlocal agreements between the County and cities, and signoffs by the USFWS, UDWR and the BLM.
- In recognition of future traffic issues, the 1995 HCP allowed the expansion of the City Creek road which removed tortoise habitat from the reserve. I personally helped move tortoises out of harm's way so this traffic solution could be included in the 1995 HCP agreement.
- A highway through the reserve was never part of the deal, and in fact, the 1995 HCP disallowed new roads through the reserve, specifically stating:

*“The largest block of habitat which will remain roadless is within Zone 3 of the reserve which is between the Cottonwood Road, Interstate 15, the Dixie National Forest, and Red Cliffs, an area of approximately 28,147 acres. The next largest block is also within Zone 3, and it is between Highway 18 and the Cottonwood Road north of Skyline Drive, an area of approximately 10,155 acres. These two blocks would constitute an almost roadless reserve area if the Cottonwood Road was gated and only local traffic allowed.”*

- Since 1997, BLM has spent over \$21 million dollars in taxpayer money under the Land and Water and Conservation Fund Act to acquire parcels in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve and National Conservation Area to “permanently” protect habitat and recreational values for future generations. These monies were never spent to make a highway happen. Now that the county and cities have gotten the development they wanted outside the reserve, they want to come after the reserve itself and destroy it with a highway. They want to throw away what everyone agreed to in the 1990s at the detriment of local quality of life.

Now, let's talk about why a highway through Red Cliffs would be catastrophic.

First: For homeowners in Green Springs, Brio, Warm Springs and Middleton, the Northern Corridor Highway would reduce property values, health and safety, and quality of life. This highway would carry 32-46 thousand vehicles per day by 2040 and would travel less than 1/10 mile from many homes, exposing residents to traffic noise, light and air pollution on a daily

basis.<sup>12</sup> The stunning scenery, tranquility, trails and protected habitat for threatened wildlife that homeowners enjoy within the Red Cliffs NCA, would be negatively impacted. Finally, homeowners are especially concerned about the risk of catastrophic wildfire associated with the highway, and reference the 2020 Turkey Farm Road Fire, which caused evacuation of Green Springs residences, as a stark example of this danger.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the highway would destroy what remains of what I have termed an “Alamo” habitat. That’s a habitat that is fighting for its life, sliding into the coffin. It’s a living thing. These Alamo habitats are about everything – threatened and endangered species, wildlife, pollinators, animal corridors, genetic pathways. The list goes on. It is not just about tortoises which declined by 41% between 1999 and 2019 as documented by UDWR. It’s about this thing called biodiversity. If you don’t care about biodiversity, you should because it is good for you. It extends your life. Many pharmaceuticals come from nature.

Also, when families are hiking in the Reserve, they don’t want to hear traffic and ingest car fumes that cause cancer and other human ailments. People want to escape from these problems. Mental health studies indicate that one of the best remedies for improved mental health is stepping into nature. The reserve was never intended to be a dumping ground for the city’s problems. Think of the reserve as the health drug store down the street. We are tearing it down brick by brick. When it’s gone, it’s gone. There’s no putting it back.

And let’s not forget that outdoor recreation contributes profoundly to a trillion-dollar national outdoor recreation economy. A lot of people move to or visit the St. George area because they want to enjoy the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. They want open space that is undisturbed. It’s good for the economy, biodiversity and the environment.

I saw the immense animal diversity firsthand during pioneering work supported by *The National Geographic Society* and *The American Museum of Natural history* in South America.

Now, much of it is gone. I thought it wouldn’t happen. I thought it was too big and too important to be destroyed. I was wrong. When politicians mismanage our natural resources, they put society on a road to collapse. This is a simple fact. We cannot live without wild places. It provides a wealth of benefits to us and all this in addition to helping maintain some mental health and exposing kids to science. These are the facts and why the Northern Corridor should be stopped.

Now, let’s talk about fire. Roads and highways introduce fire. Fire kills ecosystems, animals and people. The western states now live in a world of megafires. We have already seen the catastrophic impact of fires in the reserve. The Northern Corridor will introduce fire and it will

---

<sup>1</sup> [Washington Parkway Extension Cost Benefit Study \(dixie-mpo.com\)](#), p. 23 and Figure 20.

<sup>2</sup> [Northern Corridor Environmental Impact Statement - Chapters 1 through 4 \(blm.gov\)](#), p. 3-198 and p. 3-123.

<sup>3</sup> [Utah wildfire that burned 11,700 acres started by fireworks, 3 teenage suspects sought | Fox News](#) and [Northern Corridor Environmental Impact Statement - Chapters 1 through 4 \(blm.gov\)](#), pp. 3-191 – 3-192

not be an effective Fire Break. Over 30% of the reserve has already burned. In these burned areas, the old ecosystem is gone or dying. Invasive grasses are metastasizing everywhere. These plants like fire. Tortoises, biodiversity, and recreation all suffer. According to research by the University of Colorado published by Smithsonian Magazine, 84% of the fires in the west are man caused.<sup>4</sup>

Fire is not a theoretical discussion to me over a cup of coffee. I worked my way through college fighting forest fires across six western states. I saw the fire beast firsthand. I parachuted into fires. I saw consequences and I saw tragedy. I must admit though, that I never imagined that entire ecosystems and cities would burn to the ground. It seemed unfathomable. But that's the real world now. That's what's happening.

Look at Paradise California in 2018 where a fire burned 240 square miles and killed 85 people, or the Boulder Fire in Colorado that destroyed over 600 homes. Ask those people how effective their fire breaks were. Incidentally, regarding the Paradise Fire, Pacific Gas and Electric pleaded guilty in causing the fire and the death of 84 of these people. Pacific Gas and Electric had to declare bankruptcy. Really bad decisions have really bad outcomes. Megafires are here to stay. Extinctions are on the radar screen and so are more lawsuits.

There is already enough fire risk in the reserve without adding another road. Some might think it is unreasonable to oppose a highway that shaves off 15 minutes on a trip to Walmart or Costco. I say, the impact on our natural spaces in our community is more important. The Northern Corridor will remove living tissue and organs from a reserve that is already on life support.

The good news is, you and I can still make a difference, you can save what is left of these Alamo habits for future generations to enjoy. The first step is not allowing the Northern Corridor. It would be another nail in the coffin. There are better alternatives to solve traffic issues that will not destroy this living entity we call the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.

---

<sup>4</sup> Study Shows 84% of Wildfires Caused by Humans, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/study-shows-84-wildfires-caused-humans-180962315/>,