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**Conservation Organizations Respond to Washington County's Continued Attacks on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area**

*Litigation is latest attempt to force a highway through one of Utah's most prized wildlife and recreation areas*

**St. George, UT** – Yesterday, Washington County [filed a federal lawsuit](#) seeking to reinstate a stale and inadequate environmental review – issued in the waning days of the Trump Administration – supporting the widely-rejected Northern Corridor Highway through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area. Below is a statement from Holly Snow Canada, executive director of Conserve Southwest Utah on behalf of Utah-based and national conservation organizations Conserve Southwest Utah, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA), Conservation Lands Foundation, Advocates for the West, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, The Wilderness Society, and WildEarth Guardians.

“Through this lawsuit, Washington County has again demonstrated its impatience with a full and fair process designed to understand the ecological and community impacts of a high-speed highway through a National Conservation Area, “ said Snow Canada. “First, Washington County rushed to have decisions issued before the end of the Trump Administration; and, once a court reversed these decisions in 2023, the county is now seeking to short-circuit the analysis before it's even finished. Washington County's continued efforts to hide the true impacts of the proposed highway shows the problems with punching the Northern Corridor Highway through a National Conservation Area.”

“This lawsuit is the latest attempt by Washington County to force a highway where it doesn't belong. Viable alternatives exist that would be a better use of taxpayer funds, but for over 15 years, Washington County leaders have clung to the proposed route as the only option, doing a disservice to local residents who have been vocal in their opposition to the highway, wildlife, and all who visit the Congressionally-designated Red Cliffs National Conservation Area. It's beyond time for the county to start working on transportation alternatives that don't go through the NCA,” said Snow Canada.

“Now is the time for thorough, intentional, and collaborative planning from the County rather than a single-minded focus on a destructive highway. Instead of working together to find a reasonable solution to the issues confronting Washington County residents, Washington County is trying to revive what has proven to be a failed and widely-unpopular approach, which hinges on ignoring the science and the law and forcing an unnecessary and unworkable high-speed highway through a National Conservation Area. We should expect more from our elected representatives,” said Snow Canada,

The county's lawsuit comes at a time when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) are preparing a draft [Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement \(SEIS\)](#) to reconsider a right-of-way for the proposed four-lane [Northern Corridor Highway](#). This SEIS is a [result of an earlier lawsuit filed in 2021 by local, regional and national conservation groups](#) to challenge a 2021 decision by the BLM and FWS to approve a highway right-of-way through the Red Cliffs NCA. The [2021 lawsuit by conservation groups](#) cited violations of five federal environmental protection laws (the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act, the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act). As a result of that case, the U.S. District Court remanded the 2021 approval of the right-of-way after finding that there were “substantial and legitimate” concerns with the initial analysis.

Since 2006, local residents and concerned citizens across the country have voiced opposition to the highway, pointing out transportation alternatives outside of Red Cliffs NCA that do a better job of relieving traffic congestion, supporting economic growth and protecting wildlife, scenic beauty and local access to trails.

## **Background on Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA):**

The 44,724-acre Red Cliffs NCA is part of the larger Red Cliffs Desert Reserve that is collaboratively managed by the BLM, the FWS, the State of Utah, Washington County, and other municipalities. The Reserve was established under the 1995 Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) as part of a “grand compromise” to protect ~61,000 acres of public lands for the Mojave desert tortoise (listed as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act), while opening 300,000 acres of state and private lands for development. The Red Cliffs National Conservation Area was established in 2009 by Congress to “conserve, protect, and enhance...ecological, scenic, wildlife, recreational, cultural, historical, natural, educational, and scientific resources” of the public lands within the unit.

The region is home to important populations of the [threatened Mojave desert tortoise](#) and other at-risk plants and animals including the Gila monster, burrowing owl and kit fox. The Mojave desert tortoise is on a path to extinction according to leading researchers and its habitat in Southwest Utah is especially vulnerable given recent and anticipated growth in the region. The NCA is 45 miles from Zion National Park, and includes 130 miles of trails, two wilderness areas, heritage public use sites, Native American cultural artifacts, several threatened/endangered species and [one of Utah’s most popular state parks](#), Snow Canyon State Park. People from all over the state, country and world visit to hike, mountain bike, rock climb, horseback ride, photograph and marvel at the expansive red rock landscape.

## **References:**

1. [Federal Agencies Release Draft SEIS on a Highway Right-of-Way Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, May 9th, 2024.](#)
2. [BLM Press Release on Draft SEIS, May 9th, 2024.](#)
3. [BLM’s National NEPA Register website for the Supplemental EIS.](#)
4. [Court Order Granting Voluntary Remand, November 16th, 2023.](#)
5. [Opinion Granting Voluntary Remand, November 16th, 2023.](#)
6. [The Protect Red Cliffs Petition, with 35,828 signatures from people around the world advocating for the protection of the Red Cliffs NCA from the Northern Corridor Highway.](#)
7. [The Protect Red Cliffs Zine—Art and Narratives of a Threatened Place.](#)
8. [Highway history and background.](#)

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