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Utah Gov. Spencer J. Cox condemns the BLM's decision to revoke UDOT's right-of-way for a Northern Corridor in favor of alternative that harms local conservation efforts and recreation

SALT LAKE CITY (Nov. 12, 2024) – On Nov. 7, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) published an [environmental analysis](#) that rejects the new highway for Washington County that federal, state and local leaders have planned over many years, and instead recommended a mere extension of Red Hills Parkway. BLM's alternative route ignores congressional intent, creates new public safety risks, fails to provide needed relief of traffic congestion and diminishes protections for the Mojave desert tortoise.

The decision also impacts prime recreation land, including:

- Moe's Valley and Green Valley Gap climbing areas.
- Bearclaw Poppy Trail and Zen Trail mountain biking areas.
- 65 miles of other multi-use trails.

"I am exasperated that the Biden Administration refuses to support the preferred alternative identified by local leaders and UDOT," said Utah Gov. Spencer Cox. "The BLM's plan doesn't improve traffic congestion, hurts world-class recreation opportunities and fails to actually help the desert tortoise. It's unwise and unworkable, and I look forward to working with the Trump Administration to reverse the decision and get the road built."

Congress enacted the Omnibus Public Lands Act (OPLMA) in 2009, which provides for many conservation measures, including the development of the National Conservation Area (NCA). However, OPLMA also expressly mandates that the Secretary of the Interior work with local partners to identify a northern transportation route to improve east-west travel, reduce congestion and accommodate future growth. Congress also made it abundantly clear that this route was to be identified within three years of OPLMA's enactment. For their part, the state and county have worked diligently to ensure implementation of the conservation measures contemplated in OPLMA. However, the BLM did not identify this route until 2021, well beyond Congress's statutory timeframe, and it is now recommending the revocation of the associated right-of-way for that route.

“Washington County negotiated with the federal government and all stakeholders to create land designations to protect desert tortoises, among other things, and also a route for the Northern Corridor,” said Rep. Celeste Maloy. “The designations have been in place for a couple of decades, but the agencies are not working fairly to get the Northern Corridor permitted. The county is not getting the benefits of the bargain they made in good faith. The federal government needs to be a better partner.”

“Washington County has worked with local and federal stakeholders for many years, in good faith, to minimize the environmental impact of the Northern Corridor,” said Sen. Mitt Romney. “This BLM decision again delays completion of this project and ignores the valuable input of the County. It also fails to relieve traffic congestion or provide protections for the desert tortoise. It is time to complete this highway.”

“Once again, the Biden administration has chosen to ignore Utah's needs and the practical benefits of the Northern Corridor alternative, opting for an alternative that will do nothing to alleviate congestion in Washington County,” said Sen. Mike Lee. “This decision is a setback for our communities and regional growth and harmful to prime desert tortoise habitat in Zone 6. I am fully committed to doing whatever it takes to reverse this decision and finally complete the construction of the Northern Corridor.”

Unworkable, Unsafe and Technically Infeasible

“BLM's Red Hills Parkway modification is unsafe and does not meet appropriate standards,” said Carlos S. Bracerias, executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation. “The design puts the public at risk by adding more traffic in an already congested area. UDOT urged the BLM to address unsafe lane merging conditions and traffic congestion on I-15 during this study process. Instead, the BLM ignored years of thorough study and local collaboration. Southern Utah needs the Northern Corridor, as it is vital to a successful transportation system in

this growing area. The BLM must consider these safety issues before moving forward.”

Wildlife and Recreation Impacts

The BLM’s proposed alternative also eliminates conservation measures on 3,341 acres in “Zone 6,” which became protected from development in early 2021 when the Northern Corridor right of way was approved. Since then, Washington County has spent \$6 million on conservation efforts in this area.

“BLM’s poor decision threatens recreation opportunities while also removing protections for the desert tortoise,” said Joel Ferry, Executive Director of the Utah Department of Natural Resources. “The Zone 6 designation would have provided protections for up to 772 Mojave desert tortoises and an additional 3,341 acres of tortoise habitat on non-federal lands. The desert tortoise, as well as other native wildlife species and endemic plants, will be impacted by habitat loss and fragmentation if protections are revoked and development on non-federal lands occurs.”

Potential Development

The Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (TLA) owns almost all of the non-federal land in Zone 6 and is obligated to maximize the economic value of its lands for its beneficiaries, the largest of which is public schools.

“Our commitment to preserve trust lands in Zone 6 was conditioned on BLM’s approval of the Northern Corridor, which enhances the value of other trust lands in the area. If BLM rescinds the Northern Corridor, our constitutional mandate requires us to [explore the development](#) of Zone 6 to generate revenue for our beneficiaries,” said Michelle McConkie, director of the Trust Lands Administration.

Local Perspective

Local and state partners have kept their commitments under the terms of OPLMA, while the BLM has continually failed to abide by the requirements of the Act. Local leaders agree that the Red Hills Parkway is not a reasonable or feasible alternative to the Northern Corridor.

“The BLM has completely disregarded our concerns and violated the commitments made when the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area was created by Congress while at the same time serving the agenda of well-funded, out-of-state interest groups,” said St. George Mayor Michele Randall. “Our citizens deserve better.”

“The Shivwits Band of Paiutes has been actively engaged in the conservation efforts of Zone 6 and is disheartened by the harmful impacts to Zone 6 should the BLM’s preferred alternative of the Red Hills Parkway Expressway move forward. As the original stewards of the land in

Washington County, the Shivwits Band is committed to ensuring that any decision made is a careful balance of development necessary to accommodate the growing population in the region with preservation and protection of the natural environment, including preservation of contiguous protected land in Zone 6 and the Mojave desert tortoise populations that live within that Zone. The Shivwits Band is also committed to ensuring that our cultural heritage, including historic sites, is respected. A rushed Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement process and the termination of Zone 6 will only serve to harm our communities, negatively impact our historic sites and cause irreversible harm to tortoise populations,” said Shivwits Band of Paiutes Acting Chairwoman Carmen Clark.

“The Biden Administration allowed a local fringe environmental group to damage decades of cooperative management,” said Washington County Commissioner Adam Snow. “With President Trump in office, federal agencies will once again be our partners in balancing conservation and infrastructure needs.”

“The BLM is saying that there is an alternative to the Northern Corridor, but they’re pointing to a route that won’t work,” said County Commissioner Victor Iverson. “They are promoting an unworkable solution to our traffic challenges.”

“The BLM’s actions are not legal,” said Washington County Attorney Eric Clarke. “The entire process has been designed to ignore the concerns of local residents and arrive at a predetermined result. The BLM has destroyed local partnerships that have helped to protect endangered species for decades. If forced to litigate this issue, we expect to secure a right-of-way for the Northern Corridor, regardless of what happens to Zone 6.”

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