



News Release

BLM Utah St. George Field Office

FWS Utah Ecological Services Field Office

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Interior releases decisions for the Northern Corridor to help support local communities while also protecting habitat and species

ST. GEORGE, Utah — The Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announce today decisions that provide Washington County, Utah, the foundation for the future infrastructure needed to support one of the fastest growing communities in the nation, while providing protections to conserve the Mojave desert tortoise. The BLM and the Service are the co-lead agencies for the environmental impact statement that supported the Records of Decision (ROD) for a highway right-of-way, amended habitat conservation plan (HCP) and issuance of an incidental take permit (ITP) for the Mojave desert tortoise, and approved resource management plan (RMP) amendments.

“After many years of work, the Northern Corridor project highlights how we support growing communities by providing decisive leadership and cooperating with our partners,” **said Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Casey Hammond**. “Not only did we collaborate effectively with the local municipalities, Washington County, and the State of Utah to help address a complex and longstanding challenge, but we are making development compatible with conservation and species protection that will benefit generations to come.”

“The Service is proud to continue long-term partnerships with Washington County, the State of Utah, the local community, and the BLM to conserve the threatened desert tortoise while also balancing the long-term needs of growing communities,” **said Service Director Aurelia Skipwith**. “This HCP advances conservation through these crucial partnerships, and we thank all those involved for their collaboration and input.”

In order to grant the right-of-way (ROW) application, the BLM and Service worked closely with the applicant and Washington County to consider ways to offset the Mojave desert tortoise habitat losses from any approved development. The BLM has approved the Northern Corridor ROW for 1.9 miles on federal lands, and for a total of 4.5 miles on all jurisdictions. The final decision approves the establishment of a 6,813-acre new Zone 6 within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, which will be managed for species conservation. The final decisions also require certain habitat improvements to protect and restore native plant species.

“Our goal in all of our decisions is to be good stewards and good neighbors and we appreciate the public engagement throughout the process which helped to refine and shape the decisions,” **said BLM Utah State Director Greg Sheehan**. “Working together with the Service, cooperating agencies, and the State of Utah, we were able to secure additional protections and opportunities for improving habitat in the NCA and Washington County.”

“At the local level, we have great relationships with our partners and communities, helping us strike a balance and share stewardship of our public lands,” **said acting BLM Color Country District Manager Keith Rigtrup**. “We live here, we recreate here, we care for our lands, and we care for our future together.”

“This project has been contemplated for decades. The administrative process has been long and arduous, spanning multiple administrations,” **said Senator Mike Lee (R-UT)**. “I applaud the Trump administration and the many state and local officials involved for their diligent efforts to finally get this across the finish line. Issuance of the records of decision and renewal of the incidental take permit will allow for the continued success of the Habitat Conservation Plan and provide for continued growth and traffic relief in one of the fastest growing metro areas in the nation. This will greatly improve the lives of residents in Washington County.”

“Good things happen when local, state, and federal partners work together to both meet community needs and manage threatened species, and that is exactly what happened with the Washington County habitat conservation plan,” **said Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT)**. “These decisions are the product of many years of study to ensure that the Northern Corridor be routed in a way that would alleviate congestion and continue to protect the habitat of the Mojave desert tortoise. I appreciate the continued work of Secretary David Bernhardt, Fish and Wildlife Service Director Aurelia Skipwith and BLM Utah State Director Greg Sheehan on this project from the federal government. This has been a focus of the Washington County Commission, and I am pleased to see their hard work pay off.”

“Renewing the Habitat Conservation Plan for Mojave Desert tortoises is a great win for Southern Utah,” **said Congressman Chris Stewart (R-UT-2)**. “This HCP is a model of cooperation between local, state, and federal authorities to benefit a threatened species. Clarifying the pathway for the Northern Corridor route provided for in the 2009 Omnibus is the result of years of work by a wide range of professionals. Washington County can now move confidently into the future with travel planning and tortoise recovery. I offer a huge thank you to all of the personnel at BLM and USFWS who have worked so hard on this plan.”

“Washington County has been working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources to update its Mojave desert tortoise habitat conservation plan for over six years,” **said Washington County Chairman Gil Almquist**. “With today’s decisions, the new plan will protect an additional 7,000 acres of occupied tortoise habitat while still meeting our community’s transportation needs in a way that benefits air quality. We are excited to continue our successful tortoise translocation program and fulfill our additional conservation activities for another twenty-five years.”

The Secretary of the Interior signed the BLM ROD, which constitutes the agency’s final decision. The approved amendments to the RMPs are effective immediately. The BLM also signed the ROW grant for the Northern Corridor highway and issued the grant to the Utah Department of Transportation. The Service’s Regional Director for Interior Regions 5 and 7 signed the ROD for issuance of an ITP, supported by the Washington County Amended HCP, to the County.

The RODs and other supporting documents can be reviewed at BLM’s ePlanning website at <https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX>. If you would like to request to view a hard copy, please call the BLM St. George Field Office for more information at (435) 688-3200, Monday through Friday, except holidays.

For additional information, please contact Gloria Tibbetts, BLM Color Country District Planning and Environmental Coordinator at (435) 865-3063 or email BLM_UT_NorthernCorridor@blm.gov. For additional information on the ITP and Final Amended HCP, please contact Yvette Converse, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Utah Ecological Services Field Office Supervisor at (801) 975-3330 ext. 61912. Persons who use a telecommunications device for the deaf may call the Federal Relay Service (FRS) at (800) 877-8339 to leave a message or question for the above individual. The FRS is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Replies are provided during normal business hours.

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