BLM AND USFWS INVITE THE PUBLIC TO REVIEW AND COMMENT ON THE NORTHERN CORRIDOR DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT AND PROPOSED WASHINGTON COUNTY HCP

Documents analyze options for proposed highway north of St. George to support local communities

ST. GEORGE, Utah — The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) will issue the Northern Corridor Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Draft Amended Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for a 90-day public comment period on June 12. The two agencies are analyzing a proposal by the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) **to construct a four-lane highway north of St. George, Utah,** that may cross portions of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve (Reserve) and Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA), including habitat for the federally threatened Mojave desert tortoise, to address future transportation needs.

The Draft EIS considers various alternatives for the project, which includes whether the BLM will issue a highway right-of-way (ROW) and amend two Resource Management Plans. As a separate action, the USFWS may issue an Incidental Take Permit (ITP) that could continue to allow land use activities

affecting endangered species on private lands in Washington County. The ITP would include the highway as a possible occurrence if the highway ROW is approved through the NEPA planning process.

"The BLM is committed to working closely with Utah communities to help support their needs for growth and economic certainty, while following applicable laws, regulations, and policies," **said Acting BLM Utah State Director Anita Bilbao.** "I appreciate our collaboration with cooperating agencies and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service working together throughout the EIS process."

"Over the past 25 years, Washington County, the State of Utah, the local community and the Service have partnered together to conserve the Mojave desert tortoise while also meeting the needs of growing communities," **said USFWS Regional Director Noreen Walsh.** "This HCP builds on that success as we continue to work together to balance the needs of people with the conservation needs of the threatened desert tortoise."

As part of this process the USFWS is also evaluating Washington County's Draft Amended Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the desert tortoise, including a proposal to add 6,812 acres to the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, to help offset potential impacts of the Northern Corridor highway project, if approved by the BLM.

"I commend the BLM and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for completing the [D]raft EIS for the Northern Corridor Project on schedule," **said Senator Mike Lee (R-UT)**. "This project is critical for the growth of Washington County, one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country. I thank Secretary Bernhardt, Director Skipwith, acting BLM [State] [D]irector Bilbao, and all other local BLM and FWS officials for their leadership and hard work to advance the project to this point."

"I appreciate the work of Secretary Bernhardt, Director Skipwith, and Acting Director Bilbao, whose efforts and ongoing communication with the county have kept this project on track," **Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) said.** "This project is necessary for St. George, Washington County, and the surrounding communities."

“My office has been working closely with BLM and USFWS throughout this process. I am happy to see the Draft Environmental Impact Statement going out for public comment. I appreciate all of the work the planning team has done to keep this process on schedule,” **said Congressman Chris Stewart (R-UT-2)**.

The BLM and USFWS will publish a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* and the documents will be available for review on the BLM ePlanning website at **https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX (https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX)** June 12. The BLM and USFWS will accept public comments on the Draft EIS and the Draft Amended HCP through September 10, 2020. The BLM and USFWS will announce public involvement opportunities at least 15 days in advance through media releases, mailed notifications and/or the project website at **https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX (https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX)**.

“The Draft EIS includes analysis and alternatives that incorporates input gathered during the public scoping period,” **shared St. George Field Manager Keith Rigtrup.** “We are looking for comments that will help us refine our range of alternatives and analysis.”

The BLM and USFWS identified the preferred alternative, Alternative 3 with Alternative B for both RMP amendments, after reviewing the public comments received during the scoping period and analyzing the data gathered. The range of alternatives, including the preferred alternative are not final. Substantive comments may influence the alternatives when released in the Final EIS.

Consistent with the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act of 2019, the BLM is also requesting public comments for a potential closure to recreational target shooting. The information was shared with the Federal Lands Hunting, Fishing, and Shooting Sports Roundtable.

Links and information about the Draft EIS and Draft Amended HCP are available at **https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX (https://go.usa.gov/xw8TX)**. For public and employee safety and to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the BLM is temporarily restricting in-person public access to the St. George

Field Office. If you would like to request to view a hard copy, please call the St. George Field Office for more information at (435) 688-3200, Monday through Friday, except holidays.

To help the BLM and USFWS properly consider and incorporate feedback, please include a reference to a specific page or section of the Draft EIS or Draft Amended HCP in your comment. Comments on the Draft EIS and Draft Amended HCP may be submitted by either of the following methods: email to **BLM_UT_NorthernCorridor@blm.gov (mailto:BLM_UT_NorthernCorridor@blm.gov)**; or mail to Bureau of Land Management, Attn: Northern Corridor, 345 East Riverside Drive, St. George, UT 84790.

Before including an address, phone number, email address, or other personally identifiable information in any comments, be aware that the entire comment—including personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. Requests to withhold personal identifying information from public review can be submitted, but the BLM cannot guarantee that it will be able to do so.

For additional information on the Draft EIS, please contact Gloria Tibbetts, BLM Color Country District Planning and Environmental Coordinator at (435) 865-3063 or email **BLM_UT_NorthernCorridor@blm.gov (mailto:BLM_UT_NorthernCorridor@blm.gov)**. For additional information on the ITP application and Draft Amended HCP, please contact Laura Romin, Acting Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Utah Ecological Services Field Office at (801) 554-7660. Persons who use a telecommunications device for the deaf may call the Federal Relay Service (FRS) at 1-800-877-8339 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.

The BLM manages more than 245 million acres of public land located primarily in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. In fiscal year 2018, the diverse activities authorized on BLM-managed lands generated $105 billion in economic output across the country. This economic activity supported 471,000 jobs and contributed substantial revenue to the U.S. Treasury and state governments, mostly through royalties on minerals.

RELEASE DATE

Thursday, June 11, 2020

ORGANIZATION

Bureau of Land Management

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