



Press Release

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Conserve Southwest Utah shares concerns for proposed “Red Cliffs/Warner Valley Land Exchange”

St. George — A proposed land trade would have the BLM trading land to the Washington County Water Conservancy District without a full environmental analysis of a future Warner Valley reservoir.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) held a Scoping Meeting on March 21, 2023, for the proposed “Red Cliffs/Warner Valley Land Exchange” project in Washington County to gather public input and identify issues worthy of evaluation in the Environmental Assessment.

Conserve Southwest Utah (CSU) expressed several concerns with the proposal from the Washington County Water Conservancy District (WCWCD) to exchange 89.43 acres of private land within the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA) for 1,047 acres of federally owned BLM land in Warner Valley with the intent to construct and operate a reservoir.

“However, the WCWCD does not yet own the land inside the Red Cliffs NCA and only has an Option To Purchase Agreement with the current land owner. If the BLM allows the WCWCD to benefit from a land trade as if the WCWCD were a true Red Cliffs NCA landowner, this will set a dangerous precedent for the other NCA land trades,” said Jane Whalen, a Board Member at Conserve Southwest Utah.

The Red Cliffs NCA was established to protect the Mojave Desert Tortoise, a threatened species. Landowners with private land in the Red Cliffs NCA may swap that land with BLM to get BLM land outside of the Red Cliffs NCA. The WCWCD is trying to get the benefit of being a Red Cliffs NCA landowner to gain 1,047 acres of BLM land to build its reservoir.

Conserve Southwest Utah has several concerns and questions with this land exchange, including:

- Will the BLM conduct an Environmental Assessment solely on this land trade and not for the much larger impact of planned reservoir construction on the 1,047-acre area (but not mentioned in the Public Scoping Notice)? Is the BLM avoiding a thorough environmental review provided by an Environmental Impact Statement (required by NEPA for certain actions “significantly affecting the quality of the human environment”) by labeling this project a “land exchange” instead of future reservoir development?
- How much water will be diverted from the Virgin River annually to the proposed 40,000-acre foot reservoir and will these environmental impacts to the Virgin River species (including endangered species) be analyzed during this Environmental Assessment?
- Is the Option to Purchase held by the WCWCD adequate to allow the WCWCD the ability to legally propose this trade? Should the WCWCD be required to own—not just hold an Option to Purchase—the Red Cliffs NCA parcel before proposing an exchange with the BLM?
- Is the imbalance in acreage offered by WCWCD (89.43 acres) a fair trade for 1,047 acres of federal land?
- Will the proposed 89.43-acre area—located between the proposed four-lane Northern Corridor Highway and the Green Springs Subdivision—provide an increased benefit to the threatened Mojave desert tortoise and other species, in comparison to the benefit that would have been provided to these species if the 1,047 acres remained with the BLM? How will the proposed Northern Corridor Highway affect the species in the 89.43 acres and the calculation of increased benefit?
- Has BLM identified areas and assessed potential impacts where motorized users will go if portions of Warner Valley and Sand Mountain are no longer open to off-road vehicles?
- Would a Recreation and Public Purposes Act application provide greater protections for the natural and cultural resources while fulfilling the needs of the land exchange applications?

- What are the expected effects of allowing WCWCD to desalinate water from Pah Tempe hot spring and will this be evaluated in the Environmental Assessment?

Public scoping comments must be postmarked no later than 5:00 PM on April 13, 2023. More information is available on BLM's project website: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2022389/510>

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About: Conserve Southwest Utah is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in St. George, Utah that advocates for conservation and stewardship of our area's natural and cultural resources and for the implementation of Smart Growth policies that enable conservation for the benefit of present and future generations.