

HABITAT CONSERVATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

for the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)

A **regular** meeting of the Habitat Conservation Advisory Committee (HCAC) was held at the Washington County Administration Building on **May 27, 2026.**

Committee members present were:

Chris Blake, Chairman	Environmental Organization
Melinda Bennion (for Kevin Bunnell, Vice Chair)	Utah Dept. of Natural Resources (UDNR)
Jason West	Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
George Weekley	U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Gregg McArthur	Local Development
Austin Anderson	Citizen-at-Large
Carmen Clark	Citizen-at-Large

Absent and Excused:

Jarett Waite	Mayors Association
--------------	--------------------

Also present were:

Cameron Rognan	HCP Administrator
Randee Sanders	HCP Executive Assistant
Mike Schijf	HCP Biologist
Scott Barton	HCP Outreach Coordinator
Devin Snow	Washington County Attorney
Alysha Lundgren	St. George News
Brooke Larsen	Salt Lake Tribune
Bryan Stevens	UT Tech
Geoffrey (Geoff) Smith	UT Tech
Stacey Wittek	CSU
Brendan Botosan	CSU

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Chris Blake called the meeting to order at approximately 1:01 p.m. noting that a quorum was present.

2. CONSENT AGENDA

The Consent Agenda is a means of expediting routine matters which come before the committee for approval. The consent portion of the agenda is approved by one (1) non-debatable motion. If any member wishes to remove an item from the consent portion of the agenda, then that item becomes the first order of business on the regular agenda.

a. Approval of Agenda

b. Review and Approve Meeting Minutes

1. March 25, 2026

c. Next Meeting Date

1. July 22, 2026

MOTION by: Jason West
Seconded by: Austin Anderson
Discussion: To approve the Consent Agenda.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

3. DECLARATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

4. PRESENTATIONS

a. Andrew Barnum Museum update and draft MOU

Scott Barton introduced himself as the Outreach Coordinator for Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. He has been coordinating with UT Tech University on this project and joined the meeting to give an update on the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that they have been working on. Currently, the MOU establishes a collaborative framework to strengthen the conservation, education, outreach, and public engagement for both the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve and the Andrew H. Barnum Museum located at UT Tech University.

One component outlined in the MOU is the creation of a shared partnership identity to put a name to it. The current working title proposed is The Red Cliffs Conservation Education Partnership, or RCCEP.

They've also identified priorities that include helping residents and visitors better understand local ecosystems, native biodiversity, habitat stewardship, and responsible recreation. Those shared priorities ultimately help guide implementation efforts that are outlined in Exhibit A, which is included with the meeting materials (see exhibit 4a). Some of the deliverables outlined in Exhibit A are co-branded outreach programming that focuses on topics like desert ecology and native biodiversity, habitat stewardship, and responsible recreation. Scott shared two examples of some of the public-facing education materials that they plan to put out. The species profile cards, such as the Mojave desert tortoise and the Dwarf bear poppy examples, are something that both the Reserve and the museum would be co-creating with the aim to output at least four subjects per year.

Another important component is the community science programs. These programs create opportunities for people to move beyond simply hearing about conservation and becoming active participants in it.

Geoff Smith, who works in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University, thought that the museum is an excellent opportunity for people to look into the past at collections and historic specimens, and to learn specimen databasing. The museum isn't just a collection of old dead things; it's also a mechanism to find new things. As a regional institution, the University is in a really special place to give students on-the-ground training and to rub elbows with regional experts and resource managers. Giving students an opportunity to work in the museum, and with the partners to see what makes our area special. This is good for the museum and the students. The University has support and excitement from the top down.

Scott said another additional opportunity that they're hoping to explore is a student fellowship program, which would provide up to \$1,000 annually in support distributed amongst 1-4 students. The projects would be selected by representatives from the museum and the Reserve. The current concept includes five proposed tracks: field research and conservation science, outreach and education development, science communication and interpretation, community science and data management, and collections management and curation. These opportunities are intended to support independent student work while helping to strengthen long-term conservation capacity in the county, workforce development, and public engagement.

Another major strength of this partnership is leveraging an institution that is already engaged in outreach, education, interpretation, and science communication.

Bryan Stevens, the museum's curator, spoke next saying that he sees this as a wonderful partnership. He has been the caretaker for the collection ever since Dr. Barnum passed in 2019. His main focus has been on letting people know that they have a museum, since there are many who don't realize that. He has created several outreach opportunities with schools and homeschool groups. He has also started a monthly "Night at the Museum" event that has been running very successfully for the last three years. At this event, students and community members come together and present research that they've been doing and then enjoy the museum by looking at the collection and interacting with the live animal ambassadors. This coming Saturday, they're having their first annual Barnum Museum of Natural History fundraiser at Fossil Falls Park. It will be an educational fundraiser where the community can talk with entities who are taking care of this beautiful land that we want to keep and preserve, which is what their collection is all about.

They've also talked about putting up a rotating display at the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve Visitor Center using specimens from their collection so that visitors can also see what's going on at the museum and have an opportunity to go over there and see that. There is an abundance of opportunities for this partnership to share both of their objectives, to grow, and to see where this can be taken. Getting this collection out and about is their main goal.

Scott and Cameron Rognan discussed the need for refinement of the funding framework language in the MOU. A revision was proposed and shared with the committee that clarifies that initial partnership support is anticipated not to exceed \$10,000 annually, unless otherwise authorized through future amendments or agreements. The goal with that adjustment is to improve clarity around initial expectations; while maintaining flexibility for future growth opportunities should the partnership demonstrate enough value over time.

In conclusion, Scott said that the RCCEP will create an opportunity to strengthen community connections in a spirit of collaboration in Washington County. It would support consistent stewardship messaging, expand community science efforts, and create meaningful student opportunities. It would also help connect people more directly with the work being done to protect and sustain our unique landscape, wildlife, and natural heritage that makes Washington County such an incredible place to live.

Cameron shared the MOU that was already sent to the committee in advance of the meeting (see exhibit 4a). The County and University attorneys have already reviewed it. Devin Snow was on the call and was asked to review the proposed change to the funding. Cameron's hope, and reason for the change, was to not have an MOU that requires additional paperwork any time an invoice is submitted. Devin responded that it looked fine.

b. Discussion and possible action on draft MOU

Austin Anderson asked the presenters to elaborate on what they meant by "responsible recreation". Scott answered saying that he would be encouraging the community to stay on trails, to follow state laws, and to help user groups understand the requirements for recreating. Geoff said that the museum's focus would be more on animal education such as informing people to take a picture of wildlife, not put it in their bag and take it home, etc.

Austin was worried that the agreement would open the door for more land to be locked down. He expressed his frustrations with losing more and more land where he used to hunt, target shoot, and ride dirt bikes. Committee members agreed that many spots have been lost, but they saw that loss as a result of development in the County. After discussing this at great length, they came to the

consensus that the issue was unrelated to the goals of the agreement proposal and that they could proceed.

MOTION by: Carmen Clark
Seconded by: Jason West
Discussion: To accept the draft MOU as presented.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

Cameron informed Geoff and Bryan that there is one more step needed before the MOU can be considered official. The HCAC's recommendation will need to be presented at the next County Commission meeting for final approval.

5. UTILITY AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

a. Water tank on Cottonwood Road

To the best of Cameron's understanding, the water tank project on Cottonwood Road is still ongoing. They're completely fenced in and protected so tortoises shouldn't be getting onto that property.

b. TDS line repair near Pioneer Park

There was a proposal to do an emergency TDS line repair near Pioneer Park, and Cameron instructed TDS to reach out to BLM regarding it. Mike Schijf recently emailed Ryan with TDS to check in for updates, but he hasn't heard back from him yet. The actual work was on the City's land, but they did need to drive on the utility road going up T-bone, which crosses BLM land. That's why they were encouraged to reach out to BLM. Cameron said he and Mike will keep in touch and make sure they are compliant with HCP/BLM in case there are any tortoises in the work area.

Jason West said BLM had an email about it. After checking in with John Kellam about it, BLM's response was that they were OK to proceed so long as they followed UDP protocols.

c. Other utility projects

Jason reported that there have been some preliminary discussions on a proposal to expand the power substation near T-Bone within the existing fenced area.

6. SURVEYS AND CLEARANCES

a. UDOT – Southern Parkway

A few weeks ago, HCP Staff assisted UDOT on surveying about 70 acres for a paved trail along the Southern Parkway. There were no tortoises or signs observed.

b. Long Valley

Cameron said that while inspecting some of the fence along Long Valley, they realized that there was a breach in the fence with tortoise tracks that went from the BLM land to the neighboring private property. The County has been working with the private developers to clear those 125 acres again. They have worked out an access agreement and have received assistance from DWR. To date, at least three tortoises have been removed. This survey is not yet complete so there may be more by the time it is fully cleared.

Jason reported that the BLM has reached out to the County Roads Department regarding the D.R. Horton home development near the George Washington exit. That stretch of road has been under appeal for six years and has finally made it to the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA). The BLM submitted documentation that the majority of the road work, such as grading and road base, is already done. The exception is paving. They are now waiting to hear back from the IBLA, and the appeal process is now moving forward. The BLM responded to the judge that the initial conservation measures that were in the original EA were all completed and have been verified. It is unclear whether or not the judge is going to continue or dismiss the appeal or what remedy the judge could offer at this point. They will wait to see what happens.

7. OTHER REPORTS & BUSINESS

a. Draft amendment to Zone 6 boundary

Cameron shared the map and spreadsheet for this boundary adjustment proposal that was originally proposed in 2023 (see exhibit 7a). When Zone 6 was first established, TLA had advised following the power line road for the boundaries. However, sometime before the ITP renewal TLA sold some of the land where it no longer followed the exact same alignment and created a 3.5-acre difference. For that reason, the HCP is proposing a boundary amendment.

In 2023, the TC collaborated to identify suitable habitat to replace the 3.5 acres of degraded habitat. The selected piece (see exhibit 7a) had active tortoise sign, but it would require a culvert under the road to lead toward a fully fenced habitat. The road itself would be fenced out of the reserve,

which would be an advantage when it comes to maintenance and utility repairs.

Cameron read the TC's formal recommendation:

"The habitat coming into the Reserve is of better quality and less impacted than the habitat going out. Tortoises will be better protected when the project is complete and fencing is installed along the new boundary. Although 60 meters of the habitat coming into the Reserve would be fragmented by a future road, this is largely offset by the fact that it is occupied habitat of better quality and access will be provided by construction of a culvert under the road. Future utility access and maintenance can occur more easily outside of the Reserve. Recreational impacts can also be largely shifted to occur outside of the Reserve with the new trailhead, restrooms and camping area on private property. The Reserve size and shape remains relatively the same with a slight increase in area to perimeter ratio. The TC recognizes that this proposal represents an exceptional circumstance with a fragmented mitigation area that would only be reachable by tortoises via culvert crossing. This type of mitigation area would not generally be considered acceptable to fully offset project impacts due to issues with Reserve design and connectivity. However, in this case the habitat being removed from the Reserve is degraded and unoccupied, and the fragmented mitigation parcel is minimally impacted and occupied habitat. Recent culvert studies in the Reserve show that tortoise will use culverts for passage and sheltering, potentially indicating that access to the mitigation area could be viable. Therefore, this should be considered an unusual instance where a fragmented parcel will fully offset project impacts. The developer's commitment to locate the Moe's Valley trailhead/parking area outside of the Reserve boundaries would mitigate the current heavy parking usage occurring within Reserve boundaries. This action would reduce threats to tortoise including from vehicle related mortalities, increased risk of fire, and motorized vehicle intrusion into the core of Zone 6. Designated step-overs will help to confine non-motorized recreation to authorized trails. Due to these exceptional circumstances, we emphasize that this project should not set a precedent for future mitigation proposals with fragmentation impacts."

This project went by the wayside when there was a lot of back-and-forth and uncertainty with Zone 6 and the Northern Corridor. There is still some uncertainty, but the developer needs to move forward and hopes to implement the TC's recommendation from a few years ago. In order to do that, the HCAC needs to review it and give their recommendation before it goes to the County Commission. Then Fish and Wildlife Service will provide a letter stating if they authorize the boundary change.

The HCP is currently working on a fence plan with the developers, and that fence will be very beneficial for relocating any tortoises that are outside of it before it gets developed. Cameron felt that it was important to get the fence erected as soon as possible.

b. Discussion and possible action on Zone 6 boundary amendment

George Weekley and Danielle Costantini have already talked about this project. They know the area has been an issue for quite some time. In fact, George went out with Cameron and the commissioners to look at the land about three years ago. This boundary change is not going to be an issue. It's not a great situation to begin with, but it's consistent with how they've approached some of these land boundary adjustments in the past. It's making the best of a not great situation.

MOTION by: Jason West

Seconded by: Austin Anderson

Discussion: To forward the HCAC's recommendation to the appropriate parties for consideration.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

c. TC report – none

d. Land acquisition report - none

e. HCP Administrator's Report

a. Land acquisition update

Cameron reported that the County deeded over their 450 acres in Zone 6 to DWR. That was finalized about a month ago and will take care of some of the Section 6 lands that DWR owned within the Northern Corridor right-of-way.

Cameron was eager to hear if there have been any updates on Section 6 grants from Fish and Wildlife. George responded that he does know of something, but it is unofficial because they're still awaiting clearance from the Department of Interior. There is an approved award, but he can't share how much it will be yet.

b. TC agenda item – consider options for habitat islands (Long Valley)

Even though the TC didn't meet this month, there have been some internal conversations with FWS and DWR regarding tortoises encroaching back on private land at Long Valley. There are other situations throughout the county where there are habitat islands of tortoises, and there is a need to determine how viable of a population they are. Is it worth keeping tortoises in those small fragmented islands, or should we consider strategically removing and relocating some of those tortoise populations? Unless the HCAC is against it, Cameron would like the TC to review the habitat islands of tortoises to see what the best strategy is for moving forward.

The HCP has an idea of where these islands have historically been, especially after conducting systematic surveys over the last five years throughout the county. They have a pretty good handle where most of the tortoises occur, so all of their research will be used to identify polygons of habitat to be considered. Cameron will provide the TC with all of the info to look at it from various different angles and decide what makes the most sense. There may be some areas that they don't feel like they have enough information and may want to do more surveys, but for areas where they have plenty information, they may be able to make decisions without further surveying. Cameron will add this assignment to the next TC agenda.

c. SUU trails project

Several years ago, the County entered a contract with Southern Utah University (SUU) for human impact monitoring led by Dr. Brigit Eastep. That initiative involved having students get out on the trails to collect data on where trail impacts are, and identify what trail maintenance and signage was needed. A few years ago, after collecting many years of data, that initiative transitioned to having the students address the needed trail work and signage.

This year, given where things stand with Zone 6, the HCP thought that it would be good to have the trail crew put out signage on some of the trails that they are now managing. Mike reported that the students installed signage during a total of six field days. There's a little bit of follow-up work needed on some of them, but there is potential to work with SUU again this fall to do the follow-up work and potentially address some additional trails. At the close of the year, the HCP will provide a full update with photos in the annual report, which will give a better sense of what was accomplished.

d. Status of Northern Corridor / Zone 6

Cameron gave an update on the Northern Corridor and Zone 6. As was previously reported, the judge gave a preliminary injunction to stop any current construction activities for the Northern Corridor. The right-of-way is still intact, but UDOT hasn't been able to do anything because it paused two Notices to Proceed (NTP). However, after some recent negotiations, the judge reconsidered and said that the NTP on the geotechnical (non-ground disturbing) activities could continue. UDOT is still unable to proceed with the NTP on the ground disturbing activities.

The plaintiffs filed new claims under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) related to the exchange of the 450 acres that were a part of the Section 6 process (as discussed earlier), the HCP, the ITP, the Northern Corridor right-of-way itself, and how all those issues relate to NEPA.

It's going to be in a holding pattern for the next couple of months. The documents need to be submitted in October, and then the judge will have a month or two to sit on it, so there probably won't be a decision until the end of the year.

Jason added that after a lot of back and forth and negotiation, the judge sided with UDOT and the proponents on the NTP for the non-ground disturbing geotechnical work. Within a day, Jason signed the letter and got it reactivated.

George said that FWS and BLM submitted their responses on the revised complaints from the plaintiffs last Friday. It is also included in their joint administrative record which includes thousands of documents that have been used over the years. It is due to the court on June 8th. They probably won't see too much until October, and some other final documents will be written by then.

8. PUBLIC COMMENT

This item is reserved for items not listed on this agenda. No action may be taken on a matter raised under this agenda item (three minutes per person).

Brendan Botosan, the Public Lands Program Manager for CSU, thanked the HCAC partners for their partnership with the University, as well as checking the fences. He went on a bike ride the other day through the Pioneer Rim Trail loop and noticed some invasives. He offered to lend the support of their stewardship program to help eradicate them. Cameron responded, by giving his thanks. The HCP does projects like that each year, so he will definitely reach out.

9. MEMBER REPORTS & REQUEST FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

Jason announced that Steve Pearce is the new director of the BLM. There's a lot of HR and policy and procedure questions that have gone unanswered for a long time. They are not sure at what rate they'll start to see those decisions made, but they could affect a lot of things in the BLM.

Regarding the remaining 80 acres within Red Cliffs, the appraiser has submitted the appraisal report to AVSO, the government entity that reviews appraisal material. They've had it for about a week and are anticipating finishing their review this week. There'll likely be some comments and/or edits from AVSO for the appraiser to address. They are hoping for a final approved appraisal at the end of the process.

The BLM is still working on the High Desert Trail, and NEPA is progressing. The County's preferred location is now at the Bear Claw Poppy Trailhead, which would make it a shared trailhead for the mountain bike community and the motorized community. The BLM is working through some of the nuances on that.

Lastly, Jason reported that they've received interest from PLPCO in moving forward with travel management planning, and they are going to be asking the state to help with the funding. They know it's going to be controversial and anticipate litigation on both sides of the issue.

Right now, Jason is watching what's happening. Both the Public Reliance Rule and the Forest Service's Roadless Rule have been repealed, and there are groups trying to remove the minimization criteria. Jason had asked if they should wait to determine what the minimization criteria is going to be, but was told to keep moving forward.

Travel management is a big deal that will affect everything that the BLM does, and it's a huge workload that will affect their small team in St. George. In 2015, routes were evaluated, analyzed, and inventoried. A draft document was issued in 2020, and then the process was put on hold. There is now several years of new routes that they need to inventory and determine how to move forward with. The initial route evaluations may or may not be considered depending on the contract and guidance from the current administration. It's a big undertaking that will affect the whole county for the roads, trails, and access.

Under OPLMA, which also set the precedence for the Northern Corridor, it called for a comprehensive Travel Management Plan to be done. Comprehensive plans are more in depth and include horseback, hiking, mountain biking trails, as well as the motorized trail systems with the ultimate goal of creating a connected system of routes and maps for the public.

The BLM won't be able to satisfy everybody, even if they bring everybody to the table. Some will feel that they have not closed enough routes, while others will feel they closed too many. More updates will come. He asked all partners to

consider bringing their route data to the table. There's a lot of groups out there that are going to want to hide their trails, but if they're hidden, they can't consider them. The goal is to get everybody to come forward and work together to get all roads on the table for consideration.

Cameron surmised that the Travel Management Plan will affect Zone 6 planning as well and thought it would make a lot of sense to coordinate closely for the Zone 6 trail considerations.

10. **ADJOURN**

MOTION by: Austin Anderson

Seconded by: Jason West

Discussion: To adjourn the meeting.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:58 p.m.
Minutes prepared by Randee Sanders.