

Battle over proposed Book Cliffs highway resumes

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The Book Cliffs is a wild and remote area. Writer Sarah Stock opposes a proposal to build a highway through its East Canyon. *Photo by runt35 via Wikimedia Commons*

The ball is back in Grand County's court with regard to the controversial Book Cliffs Highway proposal. A few years ago the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition (SCIC) announced that it would attempt to build a highway through Grand County's remote and wild Book Cliffs region, despite the fact that the county has said repeatedly that it does not

want the highway.

Now the SCIC is once again groveling for our acquiescence, requesting that Grand County simply abandon existing rights-of-way through East Canyon so that the unnecessary highway project can move forward. It's amazing, no matter how many times we stand up as a county and say that we don't want the fossil fuel highway, it just keeps coming back.

There is a long history here. In the late 1980s and early '90s, fueled by controversy surrounding the Grand County Commission's creation of a Special Service Road District to facilitate the building of the Book Cliffs Highway, a voter initiative changed Grand County's form of government from a three-person commission to a seven-member council. After this switch, the newly elected council immediately dissolved the road board's administrative authority, preventing the board from spending more money on the Book Cliffs Highway, and putting the issue to rest for many years.

This issue resurfaced again during Rep. Rob Bishop's failed Public Lands Initiative (2013-2016). This time, the route for the highway was labeled on maps as a "public utility corridor" and, unsurprisingly, became a major point of contention, with much of the community speaking out against it. During this time, the Seven County Infrastructure

Coalition was created, which is now the entity making the major push for the Book Cliffs Highway. Grand County was invited to join the SCIC, and did briefly in 2014, but the issue spurred the election of new council members who ultimately voted to withdraw Grand County from the SCIC because of community opposition to the Book Cliffs Highway.

Since then, and despite our loud and sustained opposition, the SCIC has nevertheless been working behind the scenes (and with public money) to engineer the route and draft an environmental impact statement for the project proposal. In an act of complete disrespect, the SCIC applied for a right-of-way application to the BLM without even informing the Grand County Council that they were doing this. The route is entirely within Grand County's boundaries.

The Book Cliffs Highway and the SCIC represent the worst of Utah politics. A few career politicians who are in bed with fossil fuel interests have figured out a way to use public money to fund their salaries and spend their time pushing mega developments for private industry despite public opposition.

Make no mistake, this highway is intended to benefit the private and volatile fossil fuel industry, the same industry that has destroyed the Uintah Basin with development and toxic air pollution. In a thinly veiled sleight of hand, the SCIC is now claiming that the true purpose of the Book Cliffs

Highway is to increase tourism in Moab and Vernal.

Not only has the SCIC apparently failed to notice that Moab already has more tourists than it can handle, it also conveniently ignores the fact that the proposed highway would only reduce Moab-to-Vernal travel times by 20 minutes at best. No one is going to alter their vacation plans based on such a small time saving.

Tellingly, the SCIC also points out that the highway would reduce travel times from the oil and gas fields and tar sands mines of southern Uintah County to Interstate 70 by several hours. At the end of the day, we simply do not need to publicly finance a new highway – destroying world-class wildlife habitat and some of Grand County's most wild and rugged public lands in the process – for the sole purpose of extracting more fossil fuels.

The science is clear, it's time to transition our economy away from the boom and bust cycles of fossil fuel development. Actually, it's already happening. We are overloaded with tourism in Grand County. We don't need to waste precious taxpayer money on construction or ongoing maintenance of an industry highway through extremely rugged and still wild terrain.

We need to put more public money into making Highway 191 a safer route, taking care of the infrastructure that we

already have, and making smart investments in alternative energy projects and public transportation.

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