

Grand County fights resurrected Book Cliffs highway proposal

Despite decades of opposition from environmentalists, hunters and Grand County officials, a proposed highway through Utah's Book Cliffs never died.

The project merely went underground and has recently resurfaced with a [right-of-way application](#) from a consortium of energy-producing counties that have long sought to connect the Uinta Basin with Interstate 70.

Grand County is upset that the project application is moving ahead without any consultation with it by legislators and Gov. Gary Herbert who back it. Local leaders take it as a show of disrespect and a betrayal of the local government-first principle those state officials normally espouse.

While the project was [originally proposed for moving oil](#), its current version, called the [Eastern Utah Regional Connection](#), is intended to promote travel between tourist hot spots, according to Mike McKee, executive director of the Seven County Infrastructure Coalition.

"If you look at north-south corridors, we don't have very

many of them," said McKee, a former Uintah County commissioner. "Connecting these communities for travel and tourism is a great opportunity. That connection from Yellowstone to Flaming Gorge and Dinosaur National Monument, making those ties to the beauties of Grand County and the Mighty 5 [national parks], what a destination."

But Grand County residents have little appetite for such a connection, especially if it cuts through country valued for its wild character, according to Mary McGann, who chairs the seven-member Grand County Commission.

"There are so many roads in Utah that are dangerous and need to be fixed," said McGann, referring to U.S. Highway 6 in Emery and Carbon counties and State Road 12 over Boulder Mountain. "It's not really serving a purpose."

The Bureau of Land Management is now processing the coalition's application for a 35-mile right of way from the end of the paved Seep Ridge Road at the Uintah-Grand county line to a freeway exit east of Cisco. The agency is expected to soon initiate an environmental review which will be covered by a \$3.2 million appropriation from the Legislature.

The project would pave existing dirt roads through rugged and [wild country beloved by big game hunters](#). Every mile is

in Grand County, southern Utah's magnet for outdoor tourism. Earlier this month, the County Commission voted 5-2 to send a strongly worded letter to the BLM denouncing the proposal.

"The proposed Book Cliffs Highway is not in the public interest and is inconsistent with the management of public lands for conservation and wildlife protection," the Sept. 15 letter states. "The Book Cliffs Highway has always been — and continues to be — a subsidy for extractive industry, intended to facilitate the expansion of natural resources development on the Tavaputs Plateau and the ease of transporting fossil fuel resources to market."

Estimated to [cost \\$195 million to \\$418 million](#), the highway would divert federal mineral lease funds from their intended purpose of mitigating impacts of extractive industries, the letter claims.

The county contends the road would shave only 27 miles off the drive between Vernal and Moab, cutting travel times by no more than 25 minutes. Meanwhile, an estimated 138 deer would die each year on the highway.

While Moab is drowning in tourism, the scenic country around Vernal to the north is relatively undiscovered. The proposed highway is hoped to draw tourists through Uinta and Daggett counties by offering a shortcut to Arches and

Canyonlands national parks, according to McKee.

Gov. Gary Herbert agrees. In a Jan. 24 letter of support, he connected the project with his [administration's goal of creating 25,000 new jobs in rural Utah.](#)

"A well-functioning transportation system is critical to a strong economy. Roadways connect people to each other, facilitate the movement of goods, and create economic synergies," he wrote. "These transportation systems are especially critical to Utah's rural communities and businesses which typically travel distances that are much longer than those on the Wasatch Front."

The letter noted that travel between northeastern and southeastern Utah requires significant detours through Price or western Colorado. The more direct routes follow dirt roads that are rough in places, susceptible to flooding and impassable in winter.

"A unified and connected eastern Utah will be stronger than each area would be on its own," the letter said.

"Constructing a direct all-weather road between Uintah County and Interstate-70 in Grand County will facilitate regional interaction and provide opportunities to grow and diversify the economy of eastern Utah."

McGann was upset the Legislature and the governor would

throw their support behind a controversial project without consulting the very county the road would pass through.

"It shows that they have little respect for a county that travels to a different beat than other counties in the state," she said. "It's frustrating to be an elected official in a county that state legislators thumb their nose at."

In 2014, the Utah Department of Transportation released a feasibility study, examining three alignments exiting the Book Cliffs through either East, Hay or Seago canyons. The coalition's proposed right of way is the one through East Canyon, which was determined to have the least impact, according to McKee.

"We don't have to go through wilderness study areas," he said.

Grand County's criticism may have stung, but McKee is confident his coalition and its neighbor to the south can work out their differences during the environmental review process that has only just begun.

"Ideally we would like to build support with them," he said. "This is an opportunity to connect communities. I am hopeful when we visit with Grand County, we will build support for that."

That's not likely, according to McGann.

Grand County was an [inaugural member of the infrastructure coalition](#) that McKee heads. But in 2014 voters installed new county council members who promptly pulled out of the coalition, whose support for the Book Cliffs highway was a decisive issue.

"Yet, time and time again, we are forced to restate our longstanding opposition as the [seven county coalition] continues to burn thru taxpayer dollars to force this unwanted infrastructure development within Grand County's jurisdictional boundary," the county's letter states. "Not only is [the coalition's] continued refusal to honor Grand County's stated position disrespectful, it is also antithetical to the Utah values of independence and self-determination in local government."