

Washington County's HCP: Four Years Later

by Ted Owens



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*I*n the May/June 1996 *Endangered Species Bulletin*, biologist Marilet Zablan outlined the difficult process of developing a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for Washington County, Utah. The plan was designed to protect important desert tortoise habitat while allowing development to proceed in many less sensitive areas. So how is it working?

Washington County, located in the southwestern corner of Utah, is one of the fastest developing parts of the United States. This area also contains vital habitat for the threatened Mojave population of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). In 1996, to resolve conflicts between development pressures and the well-being of the tortoise, the Fish and Wildlife Service issued the Washington County Commission a 20-year, county-wide permit for incidental take of the tortoise in accordance with the county's approved Habitat Conservation Plan.

Administratively, the plan is functioning well. The Washington County Habitat Conservation Advisory Committee (HCAC) meets monthly about important issues concerning the tortoise reserve, such as proposals for the installation and maintenance of utility lines, minor boundary changes, administrative budgets, and quarterly reports prepared by the county.

When the HCAC needs biological input on proposals (e.g., construction of a utility line), it assigns the technical committee the task of reviewing the matter and providing advice on any

biological impacts. The technical committee is composed of biologists and land managers from various agencies. The HCAC then uses this advice in making its determinations, which must receive approval from the Service. Utility development is discouraged within the reserve, and must follow strict guidelines if no other practical alternative is available.

Since issuance of the permit, about 1,500 acres (600 hectares) of habitat have been legally cleared of tortoises and are in various stages of residential and commercial development. A total of 161 tortoises have been legally "taken." Since permit issuance, the tortoise issue has largely fallen by the wayside for most Washington County residents.

Biologically, much has been accomplished on the ground to benefit the desert tortoise.

First and foremost, a contiguous reserve has been established. The Dixie (Utah) Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has moved quickly to carry out land exchanges and acquisitions. To date, 4,320 acres (1,750 ha) worth some \$36 million have been acquired for the reserve by the BLM or state of Utah. Most of this acquisition has been through exchanges, although some parcels were bought with funds from the Service and the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and other parcels were donated. If more extensive development had continued within what is now the reserve, tortoise populations would be more fragmented today and they would most likely eventually succumb to extirpation.

In addition to land acquisition, a list of accomplishments completed in the past 5 years is nothing less than amaz-



Desert tortoise habitat covered by the Washington County HCP also benefits other sensitive species in the area.

ing. Because cattle compete with tortoises for forage, some 99 percent of grazing permits within the reserve's tortoise habitat have been retired by Washington County. The county also has funded a full-time BLM law enforcement officer whose sole responsibility is protection of the reserve. The BLM also has prohibited off-road vehicle (ORV) use except on a few select designated roads and trails. Consequently, formerly degraded habitat has become noticeably healthier. Further, the BLM has withdrawn the entire reserve from new mining claims. On its part, Washington County employs a full-time WCHCP administrator, biologist, and technician who coordinate and carry out the day-to-day activities vital to accomplishing conservation measures on the ground. The county also annually funds seasonal technicians with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) to monitor tortoise populations within the reserve. Over 30 miles (48 kilometers) of fencing have been built by various entities to

exclude desert tortoises from roads or other hazards and to control illegal dumping, vandalism, and ORV use.

Development of a nature education center focusing on sensitive reserve species is forthcoming. In the meantime, Washington County has provided information on tortoises and other wildlife to thousands of its residents, thereby increasing public support for the reserve. The county has also helped fund a multi-species plan for other wildlife in the reserve, which summarizes current knowledge and contains strategies for monitoring various sensitive species throughout the county, including six other listed species and dozens of species of concern. A translocation experiment is providing valuable information about which habitats tortoises prefer, how far they will travel, and whether or not successful translocation is even possible.

Although the HCP's implementation generally is going well, there are several areas of concern. Many local residents feel that the reserve should be open to

unlimited recreational use. The Service, UDWR, and BLM are concerned that unrestrained recreation could have harmful impacts on the tortoises and their habitat. A public use plan has been developed to address these issues. Another ongoing area of concern is the cost of acquiring the remaining 12,000 or so acres (4,850 ha) of property within the reserve. The BLM has done an outstanding job in acquiring reserve property as quickly as administratively possible, but it has a limited budget and has been unable to acquire some needed acreage quickly enough to avert the threat of development. Properties within the reserve still to be acquired are currently worth about \$100 million.

Despite some areas of contention, the Washington County HCP is promoting tortoise and other species conservation while accommodating the demand for development.

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