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MEMORANDUM

April 15, 2014

To: Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group

From: Desert Tortoise Recovery Coordinator, Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office, Reno

Subject: March 11, 2014, Meeting Summary

The Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG) met on March 11, 2014, at the Silverton Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. The meeting focused on discussion of 1) the status and direction of recovery implementation teams (RITs) and roll-out of recovery action plans, 2) status of the renewable energy supplement to the 2011 Recovery Plan, 3) status and future of the Desert Tortoise Conservation Center, 4) reorganization within the Fish and Wildlife Service, 5) an update on range-wide monitoring, and 6) structure and function of MOG. Presentations from the meeting are posted at http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dtro_meet_events.html.

Recovery Implementation Teams

Roy Averill-Murray and Cat Darst presented an overview of the RITs and development of regional recovery action plans (see attached summary of the process and RIT participant feedback). An overarching theme of the group's discussion was to take advantage of the RITs to coordinate and leverage projects to benefit recovery of the Mojave desert tortoise. The recovery action plans are intended to be living documents that serve as a tool to facilitate on-the-ground implementation of recovery actions. Nothing obligates actions to be implemented by agencies or precludes alternative actions to address threats to the tortoise. The RITs will regularly engage with the MOG to report on progress. The next version of the recovery action plans (i.e., version 2) should include a "report card" on the progress of recovery implementation.

One topic of discussion focused on the lack of cost and policy considerations in the recovery action plans. The RITs were instructed not to consider cost or policy in their recovery action recommendations, but to focus on biological considerations. Some comments supported including cost and policy considerations; others supported including only the biological basis of the recommendations, leaving cost and policy considerations to the implementing agencies. These issues will be considered and resolved as they arise and will be further addressed in the future versions of the recovery action plans. In addition, RIT development of "shovel-ready" project outlines will help address cost and feasibility issues for high-priority recommendations.

The importance of effectiveness monitoring of recovery actions was discussed. While resources are unavailable to monitor the effectiveness of every recovery action implemented, the workgroups have identified monitoring priorities in the recovery action plans.

The group also discussed membership of the RITs and opportunity for public participation. It was generally agreed that there is a pretty good balance of representation within the seven

Meeting summaries can be found at http://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/.

workgroups (although some advocated for more scientists, others for more managers). However, some members expressed the desire for RIT participants to have the ability to engage their constituents in review of the draft recovery action plans and the need to reduce the lag time between completion of the draft plans and MOG review. Moving forward, each workgroup should identify their stakeholders to ensure that they are effectively engaged. Input and feedback will be important in development of the next version of the recovery action plans.

MOG Direction

The MOG agreed that, rather than endorsing each recovery action specified in the recovery action plans, it approves *Recovery Action Plans (version 1)* as part of a working process. Specifically, the RITs should:

- Strive for resolution/consensus on those actions where there was formal dissent for revision in version 2.
- Consider how to broaden stakeholder involvement without sacrificing RIT function.
- Develop high-priority project proposals and then look for partnerships to leverage resources for projects.
- Report to the MOG in a year on which conflicts have been resolved and how project proposals are being implemented or have been fleshed out. The RITs should identify priority issues that require MOG direction, shared resources, or assistance in clearing roadblocks or resolving potential conflicts.

To assist the RITs, the Desert Tortoise Recovery Office (DTRO) will:

- Release (post on the DTRO website) *Recovery Action Plans (version 1)* to the public with language in the introduction that clearly states the intent that each is a working document.
 - Establish a mechanism (e.g., dedicated email address) for stakeholder input into the recovery action plans.
 - Add a section on the MOG endorsement of the RIT process and direction to move towards version 2; clearly state that this does not imply an endorsement of specific recommendations.
 - Collect comments and work with the RITs to shape version 2.
- Re-engage the RITs in spring 2014, debrief MOG direction, and initiate work.
- Provide a draft 2-page template for development of “shovel-ready” project concepts.
- Facilitate distribution of project concepts.
- Centrally track implementation of recovery actions for future reporting.
- Facilitate discussion of recovery-action recommendations that lack consensus.

Renewable Energy Supplement

A draft renewable energy supplement to the revised Recovery Plan is currently undergoing review in the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Region 8 office with the hope to release later in 2014.

Desert Tortoise Conservation Center (DTCC)

The DTCC will be closing by the end of December 2014, and all desert tortoises currently at the DTCC will be translocated or appropriately placed by November. It is the intent of the Fish and Wildlife Service to continue important functions, such as research, training, and education, without the high cost associated with operation and maintenance of a building and infrastructure.

Ideas toward that end are welcome from interested parties. Several public comments expressed concern about the closure, implications relative to responsibilities of the Clark County MSHCP and the original Las Vegas Lawsuit Settlement Agreement* through which the DTCC was created, and risks associated with translocating tortoises from the DTCC to the wild.

**After the MOG meeting, The Nature Conservancy looked into the question of the settlement agreement and determined that the settlement agreement and associated take permit and research program agreement included provisions for any outstanding funds that may have existed following the 2-year research period, transfer of the site and the facility to BLM, and for all equipment purchased to conduct the research to go to NDOW. Nothing in these documents mentioned the ultimate use or disposal of the DTCC.*

Reorganization of the Region 8 Desert Region

The Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the BLM in 11 different states towards the conservation of sage-grouse; this may lead to listing the sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act or to precluding the need to list. This issue is a high priority for our Reno office, so Ted Koch will focus on sage-grouse and responsibility for the desert tortoise, including the DTRO, will move to Mike Senn who is our manager of our field office in Southern Nevada. Similarly, in California, the Palm Springs Field Office will be taking tortoise issues for California, including much of the species' range that was part of the Ventura office. Ken Corey is the manager of the Palm Springs Field Office. Our implementation strategy for this reorganization will be completed in May.

Range-wide Monitoring

See the attached handout for a summary of this presentation. One public comment noted that there is a large gap in the northwest portion of the range where there are no conservation areas. We now know tortoises are there in numbers greater than originally thought, so there are implications for future monitoring and conservation in that area, particularly if the tortoise's range moves northward in response to climate change and changes in habitat.

Structure and Function of the MOG

Given the three-year interval between MOG meetings and the new, RIT-based recovery direction, a discussion on the structure and function of the group was timely. It was agreed that the MOG should have annual meetings with periodic calls in between, as necessary. We need to review MOG membership (originally, it was composed of state or regional-level directors of the agencies who had decision authority) and the charter regarding role and function. Potential functions that were identified for further discussion include: setting research and project priorities, identifying funding, sharing what each agency has accomplished for recovery (a function of RIT reports to the MOG), and assisting the RITs in overcoming roadblocks and resolving potential conflicts in getting projects implemented.

Next steps include:

- The DTRO will re-distribute the MOG charter to the agency leadership for review and comment (deadline: 4-6 weeks).
- Schedule a meeting within 6 months to re-establish the MOG's responsibilities and membership. Status of RIT progress can also be discussed.

Desert Tortoise Recovery Implementation Teams

Process Timeline

May 2011: Revised recovery plan signed

Early 2012: Appointment letters and Recovery Implementation Team (RIT) Terms of Reference sent to invited participants

March 2012: Series of webinars orienting members to proposed RIT process and the SDSS

Spring 2012: RIT members undertook their review of SDSS using Model Explorer & Data Explorer websites; SDSS was updated based on review, and threat rankings and recovery action rankings were developed for Tortoise Conservation Areas (TCAs)

June/July 2012: Series of webinars for each RIT workgroup introducing threat rankings and recovery action ranking from the SDSS and demonstrating Recovery Action Proposal Tool

August/Sept 2012: RIT members individually proposed actions in the Recovery Action Proposal Tool

October & December 2012: Three in-person RIT meetings at which actions proposed in Recovery Action Proposal Tool were prioritized and topics for effectiveness monitoring and research were identified

February 2013: draft recovery action plans for each RIT went out for RIT review with online survey

April-July 2013: Survey results synthesized and recommendations prepared

Product

Draft Recovery Action Plan for each RIT

Section I. Prioritized actions by workgroup and TCA

Tables of actions as prioritized at the in-person meetings

Section II. Tracking & monitoring plan

Description of reporting recommendations for recovery action implementation/maintenance

Overall recovery action plan effectiveness monitoring needs: funding requirements for range-wide monitoring program by TCA

Priority needs for effectiveness monitoring/research as identified at the in-person meetings

Online Appendix: background & supporting information from SDSS

Ranked threats for the each workgroup's tortoise conservation areas & region

Ranked recovery action types for each workgroup's tortoise conservation areas & region

Feedback Received from RIT Participants

An evaluation survey was completed by 33 RIT participants (from all RIT workgroups; 45% of total participants) and 3 managers.

Over 75% of respondents reported that the recovery actions plans produced as a result of the process were mostly to exactly what they expected.

Over 60% of respondents said that the recovery actions plans will be mostly or extremely useful in implementing recovery actions, but 30% were somewhat to extremely dissatisfied with the RIT process and recovery actions plans.

A majority of respondents stated that the webinars were valuable in helping develop the recovery actions plans. An overwhelming majority felt that the RIT in-person meetings were valuable in developing the recovery actions plans.

The RIT members overwhelmingly feel we need the full collaborative process with in-person meetings to prioritize and track recovery action implementation (83%), but ~30% of the respondents were somewhat to extremely dissatisfied with the RIT process and recovery actions plans.

While over 60% of respondents stated that the SDSS somewhat to definitely influenced their prioritization of proposed recovery actions, 15% reported that the SDSS did not influence their work at all.

Nearly all respondents replied that funding (and lack of staff) was the most important challenge to their agency or organization in implementing actions for tortoise recovery.

In response to asking what the DTRO can do for RIT members, the following requests are prevalent:

- Provide funding (for implementation and for collaborative process).
- Provide access to latest info about what has been implemented and research results on action effectiveness (webinars; session at DTCS).
- Provide technical assistance with development of programs to implement recovery actions and/or to create clear and detailed criteria for actions that are to be allowed.
- Provide clear maps about tortoise populations, habitat quality, and threats online.
- Provide ongoing interactions among the DTRO, RIT, and workgroup. Ideally, members of the DTRO will participate - not just facilitate - in future workgroup meetings.

In response to a question regarding how to continue to foster collaboration among RIT members, the following suggestions were provided:

- Annual in-person meetings plus webinars ~ 3 times/year to discuss implementation, experiences, areas where resources could be shared (esp. share information regarding monitoring and effectiveness of recovery actions; webinars should be directed toward showing high-ranking needs and results that would or have occurred due to a particular action).
- On-the-ground tour of particular areas.
- Form subgroups to tackle tasks.

In response to asking for specific feedback on the process, the following suggestions were provided:

- The composition of individual workgroups was more significant in determining the proposed actions than the underlying science or the SDSS.
- Concern about representation on the workgroups: concern that workgroups lacked representatives from agencies or entities with considerable impact or responsibility for desert tortoises; lacked more user group representation; lacked members with little or no expertise in desert tortoise ecology, management, and conservation.
- Time spent with the actions at the in-person meeting was not enough, but respondents recognize that travel is not an option in time of severe budget cuts.
- Concern that the recovery action plans are vague in exactly how actions deal with threats and that land management decisions that are key and essential to recovery were lacking since the teams were asked to focus on projects that can be funded.
- Concern that the SDSS is not useful, contains outdated information, does not apply first-hand knowledge, and was too subjective to be useful; several respondents also commented that the SDSS rankings influenced all their prioritizations.
- A number of respondents believe that the recovery actions plans should be reviewed and discussed by the MOG before the document is made public.
- The actions did not include conservation of remaining undisturbed desert tortoise habitats and populations.
- The RIT process ignored the advisory role of the BLM's Desert Advisory Committee and Resource Advisory Committees.
- There are inconsistencies across workgroup and across RITs within the recovery actions plans; actions are inconsistent or uneven across the species' range; not enough cross-walking of actions across regions.



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Update on Mojave Desert Tortoise Population Trends March 10, 2014

Line distance sampling has been used in Utah since 1999 and range-wide since 2004 to estimate density of Mojave desert tortoises. Annual density estimates through 2012 describe different trends in each recovery units (Figure 1). We estimated surprisingly large annual increases (+13.6%) in the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit since 2004, with the rate of increase apparently resulting from increased survival of adults and subadult tortoises growing into the adult size class. Populations in the other 4 recovery units are declining: Upper Virgin River (-5.1%), Eastern Mojave (-6.0%), Western Mojave (-8.6%), and Colorado Desert (-3.4%); however, 2 TCAs in this recovery unit, Joshua Tree and Piute Valley, appear to be stable or increasing). By applying estimated densities within TCAs to all potential habitat in each recovery unit, we estimate that there has been a loss of up to 106,000 adult tortoises range-wide since 2004 (Table 1). Most of this decline has occurred within the Western Mojave, while the smaller population in the Northeastern Mojave increased. Populations in the other recovery units showed intermediate declines during this period.

Estimates of juvenile tortoise density are unavailable due to difficulties in sampling smaller sizes, but we have some information about changes in juvenile numbers relative to adult densities. Declining proportions of juvenile tortoises observed in the Western Mojave and Colorado Desert recovery units reinforce concerns about the status of tortoise populations in those units due to an apparent reduction in younger cohorts that might otherwise have bolstered declining adult numbers.

A manuscript on these results co-authored by a member of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has been reviewed by Science Advisory Committee members and soon will be submitted to a journal for further peer review and publication. In addition, data from the project are being used to develop density surfaces *within* TCAs in order to provide spatial information about the distribution of tortoises in each area.

By describing the trajectory of tortoise populations, the monitoring program provides an integrated measure of the effectiveness of past recovery measures. The Desert Tortoise Recovery Office plans to investigate potential relationships between trends in different TCAs and spatial patterns of threats or risk to tortoise populations, as depicted by the Spatial Decision Support System, to further inform managers on what appears to be working in some areas or what may be contributing to declines in others. As part of an adaptive management program to recover the Mojave desert tortoise, this information will address final criteria for success of the recovery program; in the interim, prevailing trends indicate the need for more aggressive recovery implementation. However, the ability to assess progress toward meeting the recovery criteria is in jeopardy as funding for range-wide monitoring declines; reduced surveys in only a few areas were conducted in 2013 and are planned for 2014.

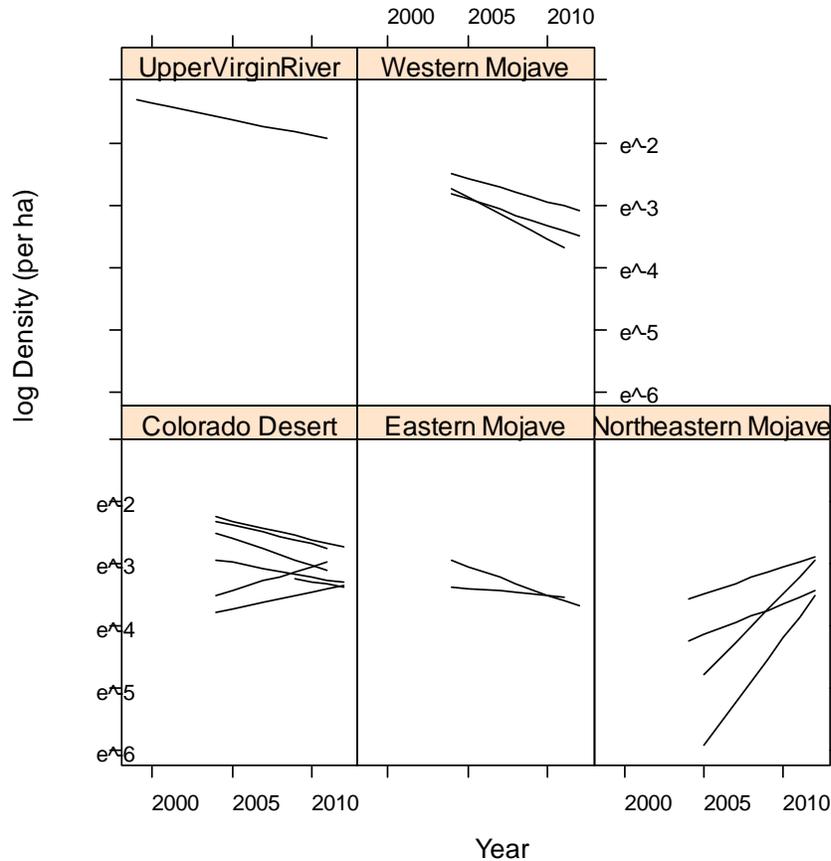


Figure 1. Linear trends in the log-transformed densities of Mojave desert tortoises in each TCA by recovery unit. Trends are reported since 1999 in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit and for all others since 2004. Separate panels are used for TCAs in each of the 5 recovery units.

Table 1. Estimated change in abundance of Mojave Desert Tortoises across all modeled habitat in each recovery unit.

| Recovery Unit | 2004 | 2012 | Change |
|---------------------|---------|---------|----------|
| Northeastern Mojave | 13,709 | 40,838 | +27,129 |
| Upper Virgin River | 12,678 | 8,399 | -4,280 |
| Eastern Mojave | 68,138 | 42,055 | -26,083 |
| Colorado Desert | 111,749 | 85,306 | -26,443 |
| Western Mojave | 152,967 | 76,644 | -76,323 |
| Total | 359,242 | 253,242 | -106,000 |