

Mojave Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group October 29, 2019 Meeting Summary

Start Time: 9:00 am

Conducting: Mike Fris, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Region 8 Assistant Regional Director for Ecological Services, Glen Knowles, FWS, Field Supervisor, Southern Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office

The Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG) met on October 29, 2019, at the Springs Preserve in Las Vegas, Nevada. The meeting included a brief progress report on Mojave desert tortoise recovery, discussion of approaches to completing a programmatic NEPA analysis for roadway fencing, and an in-depth session on desert tortoise population connectivity and the recovery network.

Meeting Summary

- 1. Welcome and Introductions:** Mike Fris, Region 8 Assistant Regional Director, Ecological Services Chief, FWS; Glen Knowles, Field Supervisor, Southern Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office, FWS.
- 2. Purpose, Agenda, and Action Item Tracking Report review:** No changes to the agenda or action item tracking report were proposed.
- 3. Opening Comments from MOG Executives**
 - a. Brian Croft, FWS Palm Springs: FWS Palm Springs continues to emphasize developing programmatic BOs to ultimately free staff time to work on proactive recovery projects. Also continuing to work on Department of Defense (DOD) - Department of the Interior (DOI) Recovery and Sustainment Partnership Initiative (RSPI) to integrate DOD funding with MOG priorities.
 - b. Andrew Archuleta, BLM California Desert District: BLM is working on unauthorized route restoration, funded a genetic study of tortoises along the I-10 corridor, funded a study on effectiveness of habitat restoration, and funded a native seed-collection contract, among other projects.
 - c. Gerry Hillier, QuadState Local Governing Authority: There has been a lot of turnover among county boards of supervisors, so Gerry is spending time getting them up to speed on desert tortoise issues.
 - d. Marci Henson, Clark County: The County's annual project symposium was held in August, and a summary is posted on their website.
 - e. John Kellam, BLM St. George Field Office: Efforts continue on outplanting and habitat restoration in southwestern Utah and on acquiring inholdings within critical habitat.

- f. Ann McLuckie, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources: Currently analyzing monitoring data from the last survey, conducted an analysis of the translocation program in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, and working with BLM on restoration projects.
- g. Cristina Jones, Arizona Game and Fish Department: Working with FWS, Mohave County, and QuadState on a general conservation plan, working with ADOT on I-15 tortoise fencing, and working with FWS to develop training courses for agency and consultant biologists.
- h. Brian Wooldridge, FWS Arizona Ecological Services Office: working on the conservation plan mentioned above and discussing with Arizona Department of Transportation fencing needs along I-15 and Highway 91.
- i. Elroy Masters, BLM Arizona State Office: BLM AZ continues to support range-wide monitoring and is working to use BLM's AIM protocol to assess desert tortoise habitat across states.
- j. Susan Klekar, Federal Highways Administration: Working with NDOT and FWS to determine appropriate minimization and mitigation measures for highway projects in Nevada.
- k. Julie Hendrix, China Lake: Julie is replacing Dan Leavitt, who moved to the Navy Southwest region in San Diego. China Lake is spending millions of dollars on infrastructure repair following the recent earthquakes. They are also in the process of increasing the biologist staff capacity with additional hiring.
- l. Chris Young, Nevada Department of Transportation: working on a programmatic BO with FWS incorporating findings from the FHWA program review and audit.
- m. Anna Johnson, Nellis AFB: Desert tortoise surveys of the south range began this year, conducting powerline surveys for ravens, looking to get more involved with the RSPI.
- n. Shonna Dooman, BLM Las Vegas Field Manager: starting an invasive grass competition study, conducting a new fuels treatment in unburned habitat in the Tule Desert, using AIM to assess tortoise habitat in southern Nevada, recently completed a 3-year restoration project of burned areas and are about to start the monitoring phase of the project, working with Nevada Department of Wildlife on raven surveys along powerlines in ACECs, and planning an EA in 2020 analyzing options to reconfigure the Large-Scale Translocation Site.
- o. Cody Leslie, Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow: conducting a habitat improvement project on base, involved in the RSPI, partnering with FWS on raven management, conducting outreach at local colleges, STEM Academy, especially regarding ravens.
- p. Walter Christiansen, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center: focused on RSPI to move the needle on desert tortoise recovery through a long-term funding commitment, need more projects from the RIT, west Mojave in particular.
- q. Diane Elam, USGS: Working on desert tortoise research on a number of fronts, in particular, health, demography, and genetics.
- r. Cameron Rognan, Washington County, Utah, HCP: continuing slow process of acquiring inholdings in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve; conducting raven monitoring, with a new local impact site found, and looking for ways to conduct NEPA analysis to facilitate raven management; continuing outreach programs; working on permit renewal for the HCP, which is complicated by a Utah Department of Transportation proposed route through the Reserve; working with FWS on a species status assessment and population connectivity issues in Washington County.

- s. Kim Tripp, BLM HQ: working to establish cohesive Bureau-wide desert tortoise management; contracted Conservation Science Partners to develop a central clearing house of BLM information on projects, restoration approaches, and results, with a deliverable scheduled for the end of the year; funding FWS to build an effects pathway and determination key; conducted a practitioners training in September with FWS and USGS to increase dialogue across offices; eager to work with DoD and FWS on the RSPI.
- t. Jennifer Newmark, Nevada Department of Wildlife: investigating tortoise home ranges and connectivity in Red Rock NCA finding that tortoises use steppe cliffs and talus slopes, finding juveniles and adults in same den, Tortoise Group volunteers have been a huge asset to the study.
- u. Ali Ainsworth, Death Valley National Park: Joshua Tree NP is working with FWS on a programmatic BO, conducting raven removals and egg oiling; Mojave National Preserve has secured partial funding for a piosphere restoration project proposed by the Recovery Implementation Team, will be initiating work this winter, and is supportive of road fencing in areas of high tortoise mortality but is short-staffed; Death Valley NP received tortoise road signs from China Lake and is preparing to have them installed and recently discovered a tortoise burrow north of Scotty's Castle, which represents an unusual northern observation.

4. Recovery Progress Update

Roy Averill-Murray, FWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Coordinator, reminded everyone that this update on the MOG/RIT recovery efforts addresses the first 2 strategic elements in the 2011 Recovery Plan: 1) partnerships, including establishing the RITs and working with the MOG, and 2) implementing on-the-ground recovery actions. Roy provided an overview of the RIT project list which was reorganized by Tortoise Conservation Area (TCA)/Critical Habitat Unit to highlight the latest tortoise population trend estimates and the number of projects identified for each area (or the lack thereof). The primary additions to the list are the Top 10 road fencing priorities presented by Kerry Holcomb at the last MOG meeting. The RITs will be meeting this winter, likely January, to identify additional projects. The new project organization will facilitate future discussion and review by the MOG based on implementation progress relative to tortoise status in each recovery unit.

An additional help in providing a “report card” on recovery progress is the fact that the Recovery Action Tracking Tool (RATT) is now back up and can be used to review implementation progress in the future. The RATT, a model explorer that illustrates the conceptual model underlying the spatial decision support system (SDSS), a data explorer that illustrates the geospatial data in the SDSS, and a risk explorer that produces a map and report on relative risks to the desert tortoise for user-specified geographic areas can be accessed at <http://nswf.mvbg.org/cec/default.aspx>.

6. Programmatic NEPA for Roadway Fencing to Reduce Mojave Desert Tortoise Mortality

Matthew Magaletti, BLM, explained that the BLM's Great Basin Regional Support Team (Team) provides NEPA support for BLM Offices within the Great Basin region, and was initially established in 2016 following the signing of BLM's land use plans to conserve

greater sage-grouse habitat across the west. The initial focus for the team was to provide high quality NEPA support for four landscape-level sagebrush-steppe enhancement projects in the Great Basin. The team was asked to conduct an assessment for programmatic NEPA analysis of roadway exclusion fence installation to reduce Mojave desert tortoise mortality and roadkill subsidies for desert tortoise predators across critical and suitable habitat in Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. Matthew presented four options (see handout from the MOG meeting). The MOG discussed the options and recommended supporting Option 3, but also including site-specific NEPA analysis for high priority fencing projects in AZ and UT. The MOG recommended option would conduct site-specific NEPA analysis for priority fence installation projects across the range of the desert tortoise, as well as a programmatic NEPA analysis for roads in need of fencing for desert tortoise across its range. Matthew will bring the MOG recommended option back to BLM leadership for approval, and if approved, the Team will begin the analysis.

7. Recovery Network and Connectivity

DT population connectivity has fallen under increased scrutiny in recent years, spurred especially by the renewable energy boom and recent or proposed development of large tracts of occupied tortoise habitat. A lot of research and modeling have been done to investigate connectivity, and increasing numbers of management decisions are trying to take this information into account. However, all this information has never been brought together for discussion in a range-wide management forum. Therefore, at the last MOG meeting Roy Averill-Murray and Todd Esque (USGS) were charged with organizing this session to facilitate a discussion of how connectivity information and data should influence agency decision-making on a multi-jurisdictional, landscape scale. Some of the issues that were raised include the sufficiency of existing TCAs for recovery of the Mojave desert tortoise, the importance of linkages between TCAs as part of the recovery network, and vulnerabilities to the TCAs and linkages.

Linda Allison (FWS) provided a background on the framework for desert tortoise recovery and an overview of basic population connectivity principles relative to desert tortoises. Todd Esque gave an overview of recent (published and in review) modeling work relative to tortoise population connectivity. Roy Averill-Murray described how this recent information has been used in management decisions to date and how the information applies to future decision making. Kirsten Dutcher, Ken Nussear, and Kevin Shoemaker (all with the University of Nevada, Reno) then described several ongoing research projects related to connectivity and how they will help managers in the future.

The panelists will be developing a white paper to synthesize the information from the session. Feedback on the white paper development included a request to include criteria that managers should look at in order to maintain linkages when evaluating proposed projects. Synthesized scientific information would be helpful to address political pressure during project development. Incorporating the “total disturbance index” relationship to desert tortoise presence to connectivity modeling would be helpful. Identifying avenues for technology transfer to facilitate the use of new models by managers would also be helpful.

8. Review of Action Items

See Action Item Tracking Report below.

9. Public Comments

No public comments were offered.

10. Closing Comments/Future Agenda Items/Next Meeting Date

- a. Future agenda items (see below)
- b. Meeting evaluations were collected by Glen and will be used to improve future meetings.
- c. Future meetings: Glen will solicit dates for 2020 webex and in-person meetings with the dissemination of this meeting summary.

Suggested Future Agenda Items	
1	Effects Pathways Manager and consultation tool in FWS ECOS (suggested at previous meeting)
2	Review and discuss white paper on connectivity (Roy Averill-Murray, Todd Esque)
3	Raven management and results from the meta-analysis project (Kerry Holcomb, Ken Nussear)
4	RSPI update and feedback (Walter Christiansen, Brian Croft)
5	RIT proposal development process: establishing a broader dynamic/feedback loop to produce larger, more integrated project proposals, i.e., focused on scale rather than number of projects (Roy Averill-Murray, Flo Deffner)

MOG Attendees (not including agency support staff or other stakeholders)

Agency	Name	Title/Office
Clark County	Marcy Henson	Desert Conservation Program
QuadState Local Governments Authority	Gerry Hillier	Executive Director
Nevada Department of Wildlife	Jen Newmark	Wildlife Diversity
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	Ann McLuckie	Wildlife Biologist
Arizona Game and Fish Department	Cristina Jones	Nongame Branch
BLM, Arizona	Elroy Masters	Wildlife Biologist (MGMT), Arizona State Office
BLM, California	Andrew Archuleta	California Desert District Manager
BLM, Nevada	Shonna Dooman	Las Vegas Field Manager
BLM, Utah	John Kellam	Wildlife Biologist
BLM, HQ	Kim Tripp	National Threatened and Endangered Species Program Lead
Death Valley National Park	Ali Ainsworth	
FWS, Region 8	Mike Fris	Assistant Regional Director, Ecological Services
FWS, Region 2	Brian Wooldridge	Wildlife Biologist, Arizona Ecological Services Office
USGS	Diane Elam	Research Manager, Western Ecological Research Center
Edwards Air Force Base	Julie Hendrix	Natural Resources Specialist
Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake	Walter Christensen	Natural Resource Officer
Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center	Cody Leslie	Natural Resources Specialist
Marine Corps Logistics Base		

Mojave Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group Action Item Tracking Report

Note: Items marked “Closed” will be removed from the next iteration of the report.

Item Date / No.	<u>Action Item</u>	Assigned To / Due Date	Status
Item 2017 Sep#01	Provide list of RIT projects/descriptions/budgets to MOG	DTRO	Ongoing
Item 2018 Jun#01	Let FWS know about proposals that could use mitigation funds	All	Ongoing
Item 2018 Jun#02	Use Recovery Action Tracking Tool (module in the spatial decision support system [SDSS]) to track all recovery actions	DTRO	Ongoing
Item 2018 Sep#01	Provide more information/documentation of available funds for desert tortoise recovery	Glen Knowles	Closed
Item 2019 Feb#01	Send information on your non-RIT Recovery Actions to Flo Deffner (Flo_Deffner@fws.gov)	All	Open
Item 2019 Feb#02	Report annually on range-wide line distance sampling surveys	Glen Knowles	Ongoing
Item 2019 Feb#03	Provide table of high priority road fencing needs and road priority model to MOG – MOG members should send GIS data on existing exclusion fencing	Kerry Holcomb	Closed

Item Date / No.	<u>Action Item</u>	Assigned To / Due Date	Status
	along roadways to Kerry Holcomb (Kerry_Holcomb@fws.gov)		
Item 2019 Feb#04	Brian Croft will work with interested MOG members to identify high priority programmatic NEPA needs for desert tortoise and report at a future MOG meeting – please let Brian know if you want to be involved (Brian_Croft@fws.gov , 760-322-2070 x410)	Brian Croft	Open
Item 2019 Feb#05	Roy Averill-Murray will work with other interested agencies and organizations to develop a session on crucial connectivity corridors for desert tortoise	Roy Averill-Murray	Closed
Item 2019 Oct#01	BLM will seek approval from BLM leadership for the BLM Great Basin Regional Support Team to develop site-specific NEPA analysis for priority fence installation projects across the range of the desert tortoise, and if approved, will present at a future MOG meeting on development/completion	Matthew Magaletti	Open