

# Mojave Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group Webinar Summary April 29, 2020

**Start Time:** 10:00 am

**Conducting:** Glen Knowles, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Field Supervisor, Southern Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office

The Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG) convened via webinar/conference call on April 29, 2020. Glen Knowles (USFWS) reviewed the agenda and Action Item Tracking Report. The call was attended by a diverse group of approximately 75 people including MOG executives, managers, staff, and interested parties. The Action Item Tracking Report and MOG/RIT Panning Cycle are attached.

## Upcoming Meetings

- *MOG webinar:* July 8, 2020
- *MOG meeting:* October 7, 2020, Springs Preserve, Las Vegas, Nevada

## Meeting Summary

**Update on the Recovery and Sustainment Partnership Initiative (RASP):** Brian Croft, Division Chief, Mojave Desert Division, Palm Springs Fish and Wildlife Office

- June 2018 MOU between DOD and DOI to develop the RASP initiative to “develop and promote effective ecosystem and species conservation” and “increase flexibility for military mission activities”
- The Mojave desert tortoise was one of 10 priority species identified for the initiative by DoD and USFWS
- To carry out the goals of the RASP initiative for the desert tortoise, FWS and DoD are
  - Developing a section 7(a)(1) recovery program in coordination with BLM to outline recovery actions that DoD can fund or implement to benefit desert tortoise recovery
  - Developing section 7 consultations for several installations in the western Mojave Desert to provide increased mission flexibility.
- A draft BO for Fort Irwin was issued to the Army this week, and we anticipate issuance of a draft BO for MCAGCC later this week. We will be working through the consultation process with other desert installations over the course of the summer.
- Each BO contains an initial framework to provide an outline of the section 7(a)(1) program, including cost estimates.
  - Recovery actions are focused on desert tortoise critical habitat and other important areas in the western Mojave Desert
  - Current outline for the program includes funding for law enforcement, route closures, habitat restoration, installation of highway exclusion fencing, population augmentation, permanent habitat protection through easements or acquisitions,

and funding of a RASP coordinator position to coordinate implementation of the recovery actions outline in the plan.

- A full five-year implementation plan will be developed over the next year with the initial framework as a guide.
- Because BLM is an integral part of implementing the 7(a)(1) program, we are coordinating closely with them in development of the implementation plan.
- The 5-year plan represents a planning horizon, but the contents of the plan may change and be updated from time to time based on changing recovery priorities and management needs.
- However, DoD is committing to annual funding of the program through the biological opinions.
- DoD anticipates being able to commit \$2.7 million per year to the program, subject to appropriations and compliance with the Anti-Deficiency Act. DoD is also applying for a REPI challenge grant for \$14.7 million dollars to help jump start the program. This is through a grant process, so the funding source is less certain. However, this RASP initiative is a high priority for DOD and tortoise is a high-priority species within the RASP, so we are hoping the application will be competitive.

**Update on Programmatic NEPA for Roadway Fencing to Reduce Mojave Desert Tortoise Mortality:** Matthew Magaletti, Regional NEPA Support Team, Bureau of Land Management

Previously, the MOG agreed to conduct site-specific NEPA analysis for priority fence installation projects on private, CSLC, and Federally managed lands in NV, CA, UT, and AZ and to conduct a programmatic NEPA analysis for secondary segments of road within these same states. Since the last MOG webinar, the NEPA Support Team has established a Sharepoint site that will be used as a clearing house for important information and updates. Once we have identified all the cooperators on this initiative, we will begin uploading project content onto the site to keep everyone informed. A third party contract for data gathering has been drafted for cultural and natural resource surveys. A project governance structure (Memorandum of Understanding) and Purpose and Needs statement have been drafted. GIS and legal descriptions for priority, site-specific segments to be analyzed have been compiled, and all ROW holders have been identified.

Next steps for Summer 2020 include:

- Initial outreach to potential cooperators (invitations).
- Draft proposed action and alternatives.
- Award 3<sup>rd</sup>-party contract for data gathering and NEPA support.
- Hire term archeologist that will help lead the Section 106 process for this initiative.
- Contractors begin data gathering.
- Initial cooperators meetings to refine alternatives.
- Nancy Army will be replacing Matt as the permanent project manager for this initiative when Matt's detail position ends.

MOG members are asked to:

- Please provide feedback on the draft MOU (including the draft purpose and need). Send track changes and comments to Matt Magaletti ([mmagalet@blm.gov](mailto:mmagalet@blm.gov)) no later than June 15, 2020. Specifically:
  - Review the document on behalf of your agency and provide revisions in track changes.
  - Review the purpose and need for the effort which is found on pages 2-3 (Background) of the draft MOU.
  - Identify representatives for each of the working groups on this initiative (Appendix 1 of the MOU).
- Respond to our cooperating invitation letter, which we hope to mail out by the end of May.

**Spatial Analysis of 2013–2018 Raven Monitoring and Management Data for Desert Tortoise Critical Habitat Units in the Deserts of California: Ally Xiong, University of Nevada, Reno**

Using data collected from the Common Raven monitoring program in California from 2013 through 2018, Ally and Ken Nussear have developed statistical models to provide spatial context of 1) raven nest density and nesting preferences, 2) nesting success, 3) offending nests associated with tortoises carcasses, and 4) raven diet throughout Desert Tortoise Critical Habitat Units (CHU). They analyzed nest survey data collected for nests on both anthropogenic and natural substrates using a variety of spatial methods. 1) *Natural-substrate nests* tend to be located in areas of high desert tortoise habitat-probability, closer to urban areas (except in the southern Colorado Desert where landfills were more important) and agriculture, and in rougher terrain. *Anthropogenic-substrate nests* are more prominent in areas with high desert tortoise habitat probability (except in the western Mojave Desert) and closer to seasonal water resources. 2) Overall, 1/2 or more raven nests were successful during surveys. Fledging success in natural nests in the eastern Mojave Desert was higher for nests in rougher terrain, lower breeding-season temperatures, and closer to water sources. Fledging success in natural nests in the western Mojave Desert was associated with lower nest density and in the southern Colorado Desert with higher winter precipitation. Fledging success on anthropogenic substrates was higher with higher winter precipitation across the desert tortoise’s range in California. 3) Offending nests on both substrate types in the western Mojave Desert were closer to human subsidies such as roads, urban areas, and agriculture, and higher nest density. Offending nests on natural substrates in the southern Colorado Desert were in less rugged terrain. Offending nests on both substrate types in the eastern Mojave Desert were associated with higher desert tortoise habitat probability. 4) Tortoise remains were uncommon to rare in raven pellets in all CHUs except Chemehuevi. In Chemehuevi pellets, tortoise remains were found in ~20% of all pellets, while tortoise remains occurred in <5% of pellets in all other CHUs.

A final report on the project is forthcoming, but some preliminary management recommendations include: a) randomize future surveys of raven nests to reduce bias associated with powerlines; b) increase removal/oiling of raven nests on anthropogenic substrates, especially when winter precipitation is above average (>29 mm); c) control measures in the eastern Mojave Desert should also prioritize nests on natural substrates in areas near bodies of water and rougher terrain. Additional information may be obtained by contacting Ally at [axiong@nevada.unr.edu](mailto:axiong@nevada.unr.edu) or Ken Nussear at [knussear@unr.edu](mailto:knussear@unr.edu).

**Desert Tortoise Transportation Ecology Workshop:** Flo Deffner, Desert Tortoise Recovery Biologist, Desert Tortoise Recovery Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

USFWS has partnered with the Center for Large Landscape Conservation (CLLC) to organize and host a transportation ecology workshop to address issues and challenges encountered when attempting to implement installation of fencing and culverts to reduce desert tortoise road mortality, ensure population connectivity, and protect tortoise populations and habitat. CLLC will provide facilitation and moderators and cover costs incurred by the workshop such as meeting venue fees, vehicle rentals for a field trip, printing, and travel costs for CLLC staff and invited participants. The Clark County Desert Conservation Program contributed \$10,000, Federal Highways Administration \$7500, and the USFWS-National Fish and Wildlife Foundation \$9600 to put together the workshop. The workshop will include representatives from all four State transportation and wildlife agencies within the range of the Mojave desert tortoise; representatives from federal agencies including the Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Federal Highways Administration, Federal Rail Authority, Department of Defense, and US Geological Survey; and other local agencies and transportation-ecology experts. The workshop also will provide an opportunity to advance coordination on the programmatic NEPA analysis of highway fencing across the range of the Mojave desert tortoise.

**MOG Charter:** Glen Knowles

Glen Knowles reviewed the MOG Charter changes that had been provided to the MOG, explaining that feedback from the MOG during the January webinar and since has been that the MOG membership would like to preserve the current operational structure and is generally supportive of the existing Charter. The only changes made were to add the Federal Highways Administration and State departments of transportation for Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah to the MOG membership; change the description of MOG meetings to reflect the current spring/fall meeting schedule; and eliminate the requirement for signatory pages. Glen asked that MOG members send addition comment and edits to him, with the goal of finalizing the MOG Charter by the October 8 MOG Meeting. Mike Westphal said CA BLM would have comments. We are now requesting comments on the MOG Charter by June 19, 2020.

**Desert Tortoise “Recovery Network” and Connectivity Session Update:** Roy Averill-Murray, Desert Tortoise Recovery Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Roy Averill-Murray and Todd Esque, USGS, organized a desert tortoise connectivity session at the MOG’s request at the December MOG meeting. Subsequently, that session was expanded for a special session at the Desert Tortoise Council Symposium in late February. Work has since been on a white paper summarizing the state of knowledge and recommendations for managing population connectivity for desert tortoises, which has been slowed by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a draft is nearing completion. The goal is to have a draft circulated among MOG managers in time for review and written feedback prior to the July MOG meeting, at which time additional discussion will help finalize the paper.

**Review of Action Items**

There were no major action items were identified, but MOG members are asked to:

- 1) Provide feedback on the programmatic highway fencing MOU to Matt Magaletti ([mmagalet@blm.gov](mailto:mmagalet@blm.gov)) Nancy Army ([narmy@blm.gov](mailto:narmy@blm.gov)) no later than June 15, 2020.
- 2) Provide comments on the MOG charter by June 19, 2020.

**Attachment 1: Mojave Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group  
Action Item Tracking Report**

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

| <b>Item Date / No.</b>      | <b><u>Action Item</u></b>   | <b>Assigned To / Due Date</b> | <b>Status</b> |
|-----------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Item 2017<br/>Sep#01</b> | Provide list of RIT projects/descriptions/budgets to MOG  | DTRO                          | Ongoing       |
| <b>Item 2018<br/>Jun#01</b> | Let FWS know about proposals that could use mitigation funds  | All                           | Ongoing       |
| <b>Item 2018<br/>Jun#02</b> | Use Recovery Action Tracking Tool (module in the spatial decision support system [SDSS]) to track all recovery actions  | DTRO                          | Ongoing       |
| <b>Item 2019<br/>Feb#01</b> | Send information on your non-RIT Recovery Actions to Flo Deffner ( <a href="mailto:Flo_Deffner@fws.gov">Flo_Deffner@fws.gov</a> )   | All                           | Open          |
| <b>Item 2019<br/>Feb#02</b> | Report annually on range-wide line distance sampling surveys  | Glen Knowles                  | Open          |
| <b>Item 2019<br/>Feb#04</b> | 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 ( <a href="mailto:Brian_Croft@fws.gov">Brian_Croft@fws.gov</a> , 760-322-2070 x410) | Brian Croft                   | Open          |
| <b>Item 2020<br/>Apr#01</b> | MOG members provide feedback on the programmatic highway fencing MOU to Matt Magaletti ( <a href="mailto:mmagalet@blm.gov">mmagalet@blm.gov</a> ) no later than 29 May 2020   | All                           | Open          |

## Attachment 2: MOG/RIT Cycle

