

# **Mojave Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group October 7, 2020 Virtual Meeting Summary**

**Start Time:** 10:00 am

**Conducting:** Mike Fris, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Legacy 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 virtually via Zoom on October 7, 2020, and was attended by approximately 80 people. The meeting included a discussion finalizing revision of the MOG charter, a brief progress report on Mojave desert tortoise recovery, an update on the programmatic NEPA analysis for roadway fencing, an update on range-wide population monitoring, an overview of a white paper on desert tortoise population connectivity, and an update on a listing settlement on the Sonoran desert tortoise.

## **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. Jerry Davis, AZ Deputy State Director, BLM: New to the MOG, replaced Karen McKinley in August.
  - b. Karen Mouritsen, CA State Director, BLM: There is a lot of restoration work under way, including a project nearing completion by USGS to evaluate success of route restoration. Expect to provide funding for range-wide population monitoring. Funding a study by UC Davis on impacts of ravens on head-started tortoises.
  - c. Angie Bullets, Southern Nevada District Manager, BLM: Renewable energy continues to be a large focus.
  - d. Alan Shepherd, Acting NV Deputy State Director, BLM: Planned tortoise surveys near Beatty were postponed and rescheduled for 2021 due to COVID-19.
  - e. Keith Rigtrup, St. George Field Manager, BLM: Greg Sheehan is the new Utah State Director. Have been dealing with two wildfires in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve that burned ~12,500 acres; outplanting and seeking additional funds with the State of Utah for restoration.
  - f. Jeff Humphrey, Field Supervisor, Arizona Ecological Services Office, FWS: Continuing to work on general conservation plan for desert tortoise in Mojave County with the Arizona Game and Fish Department. We assisted the Utah Ecological Services Office

- with the ESA section 7 consultation for the Lake Powell pipeline. Also developing a species status assessment for Sonoran desert tortoise.
- g. Brian Croft, Acting Assistant Field Supervisor, Palm Springs Field Office, FWS: Recently completed programmatic biological opinions with BLM and Mojave National Preserve and have one in progress with CalTrans. New Assistant Field Supervisor Rollie White will start on October 25. Work with the DoD continues on the Recovery and Sustainment Partnership Initiative (RASP).
  - h. Yvette Converse, Utah Field Supervisor, FWS: Completed a biological opinion on the Lake Powell pipeline with the Arizona Ecological Services Office. Working on a biological opinion on Washington County's Northern Corridor and an incidental take permit for the County's amended HCP; completion expected by the end of the year.
  - i. Glen Knowles, Southern Nevada Field Supervisor, FWS: The Desert Tortoise Recovery Office has been working on a population augmentation strategy which is currently circulating for external comment. Several biological opinions for renewable energy projects recently have been completed or are in progress; more emphasis is being placed on mowing to maintain open sites with vegetation intended to allow occupation by desert tortoises and other wildlife post-construction.
  - j. Mark Sappington, Chief of Resources and Science, Death Valley National Park: Routine desert tortoise management at Death Valley continues to center on 1) educational trainings for park staff and road contractors to prevent injuries and fatalities at work sites and on roadways and 2) weed management in desert tortoise habitat. Recently, park personnel also contributed to the BLM-led programmatic NEPA for Mojave Desert tortoise fencing initiative (NPS lead is Michael Vamstad at JOTR) and developed basic road-grading specifications for new contracts within potential desert tortoise habitat. Planning to install desert tortoise signs this winter that were donated to the park by DoD. Issued a research permit to support the tortoise genetic connectivity work being conducted out of UNR.
  - k. Erin Eichenberg, Integrated Resources Program Manager, Tule Springs National Monument: Used end of year money to fund FWS and Tortoise Group raven predation study at the monument to include raven point counts and using 3D models of desert tortoise and trail cams to capture information on how quickly tortoises are preyed by ravens and to identify those locations. This will be a pilot study for implementing the same project in other parts of southern Nevada. Continuing to gather baseline information on desert tortoise populations within the monument.
  - l. Margaret Goodro, Superintendent, Lake Mead National Recreation Area: A potential I-11 route through the park and in desert tortoise habitat has been proposed. Planning public education about road fencing. The covid-19 pandemic has increased visitation in the park, had over 15 million visitors this year.
  - m. Debra Hughson, Chief of Science and Resource Stewardship, Mojave National Preserve: Looking at how to redirect traffic from areas where road kills are common but fencing is infeasible due to the topography.
  - n. Diane Elam, Research Manager, Western Ecological Research Center, USGS: Successfully kept field work going during the pandemic. Kristin Berry published paper on a 14-year study of desert tortoise.
  - o. Brian Henen, Ecologist, Marine Corps Ground Combat Center: Primary focus has been working on the RASP. Continuing translocation monitoring.

- p. Cody Leslie, Marine Corps Logistics Base, Barstow: Wrapping up surveys on nine established plots.
- q. Dave Housman, Natural Resources Specialist, Ft. Irwin: Have been working on RASP. Working on extending the training land withdrawal beyond 2025. Working with USGS on tortoise health assessments in the Western Training Area and off post. A new Natural & Cultural Resources Manager should be in place soon.
- r. Anna Johnson, Natural Resources Program Manager, Nellis Air Force Base: Increased tortoise survey efforts. Requesting funds for restoration of two small fires (~100 acres) in tortoise habitat.
- s. Julie Hendrix, Natural Resources Specialist, Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake: Survey delays due to earthquake (2019) and then COVID. Getting back on track with some surveys in the Superior Cronese CHU in south range, as well as other areas on the installation previously identified as suitable habitat. Current fall 2020 surveys include part of the unfenced Cuddeback land withdrawal which was formerly open to the public.
- t. Del Abdalla, Federal Highways Administration: FHWA is working with FWS to amend their programmatic biological opinion and are working on the DT transportation ecology workshops.
- u. Cristina Jones, Turtles Project Coordinator, Arizona Game and Fish Department: Funded a study on genetics of Mojave Desert Tortoises east of the Colorado River. Planning surveys on the west end of Grand Canyon National Park.
- v. Scott Wilson, Region 6 Environmental Program Manager, California Department of Fish and Wildlife: Dealing mostly with permitting and environmental review of projects. Research permits are now processed out of headquarters in Sacramento. Completed evaluation of petition to uplist the desert tortoise to Endangered under the California Endangered Species Act. Recommended uplisting to Commission. Acceptance by the Commission initiates a one-year status review process. Not great implications in the regulatory process; mainly highlights the status of the species in California. A petition to list the western Joshua tree was also accepted, which will add a new, huge workload to staff.
- w. Matt Flores, Wildlife Staff Specialist, Nevada Department of Wildlife: Initiating a small-scale restoration project developed through the Recovery Implementation Team process at Gold Butte on Mormon Mesa to establish native plants at guzzlers.
- x. Ann McLuckie, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources: Responding to >11,000 acres in fires in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve and conducting mortality surveys. Developed a proposal under Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative. Planning with BLM to plant 400 plants provided by UNLV.
- y. Scott Quinell, Senior Environmental Planner, California Department of Transportation: Finalizing programmatic biological opinion with FWS. Contributed money to raven fund. Planning on participating in the Transportation Workshop.
- z. Kristi Holcomb, Environmental Scientist, Nevada Department of Transportation: Reinitiated programmatic biological opinion with FWS. Early stages of research project on design modifications for highway crossing structures for desert tortoises.
- aa. Kimberley Jenkins, Clark County Desert Conservation Program: In midst of biennial HCP implementation and budgeting process. Working on a number of projects, including tortoise surveys adjacent to culverts along US 95, genetics of translocated tortoises at the Boulder City Conservation Easement, among others.

- bb. Darrell Lacy, Community Development Director, Nye County: A lot of land in the county (100s of square miles) has been proposed for solar development. Concerned about consistent mitigation across projects and about risk of fire associated with crushing/mowing options for solar development (i.e., leaving vegetation in place under/around panels).
- cc. Cameron Rognan, HCP Administrator, Washington County: Surveying burned areas in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. Working with Shivwitz Band of Piutes. Working on HCP amendment and hoping for decision by early next year.
- dd. Gerry Hillier, Executive Director, QuadState Local Governing Authority: More focused on internal activities due to the covid-19 pandemic, working with counties to coordinate on potential state listing of the Joshua tree in California, and Sonoran desert tortoise listing settlement.

**4. MOG Charter**

Glen Knowles reviewed the changes to the charter suggested by the MOG representatives, including adding transportation agencies, adding language regarding legal responsibilities and authorities, and eliminating signatories, and the revised charter was approved by consensus.

Glen also described plans for conducting future meetings to provide greater utility to executive-level agency leadership in helping move the recovery needle forward (beginning with the spring 2021 meeting, hopefully to be held in person at the Springs Preserve in Las Vegas). Glen solicited input on the meeting outline below by the end of the year.

Start Time	Executive Session
10:00	Welcome and Introductions, Purpose and Agenda Review, Opening Comments
11:00	State of the Mojave Desert Tortoise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Population status, trends, threats</li> <li>• Recovery strategy, MOG/RIT role, priorities</li> <li>• Major recovery successes, initiatives               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ connectivity, augmentation, ravens, RASP</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Existing recovery resources               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ REAT/DMG raven, NV NFWF, NV BLM remuneration</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Obstacles and missed opportunities               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ mgmt alignment, funding flexibility, durability, regulatory hurdles, engagement</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
11:15	Discussion: What do we need to more efficiently advance recovery?
12:00	Lunch
Delegate/Technical Session	
1:30	3-4 Management or technical items

#### **5. Recovery Implementation Teams (RITs) Current Project List and Funding Status**

Roy Averill-Murray, FWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Coordinator, provided a quick overview of recently funded projects and projects in need of funding listed in the RIT project table provided in advance of the meeting (see [https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert\\_tortoise/dtro/dtro\\_meet\\_events.html](https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dtro/dtro_meet_events.html)). As in past meetings, there was little discussion about how agencies might fund particular projects or work together to leverage funding of projects. Discussion of how project review, funding, and implementation might be improved would be a good topic for the Executive session as part of the revised format mentioned above. Gerry Hillier asked about the desert tortoise recovery action tracking database and whether we are tracking appropriated funds and mitigation funds. Roy said the database project has met with some setbacks but is still in progress.

#### **6. Update on Programmatic NEPA for Roadway Fencing to Reduce Mojave Desert Tortoise Mortality<sup>1</sup>**

Nancy Army, BLM Nevada State Office, provided an update on the programmatic NEPA for roadway fencing. Since April, the project team has formalized the project governance structure in an MOU, drafted a third-party contract for baseline environmental data gathering, drafted an initial description of the proposed action and alternatives, and developed a strategy for satisfying NHPA Section 106 requirements. Next steps for October/November 2020 include:

- Finalize outreach to potential cooperators (invitations) and finalize cooperator agreements
  - Award 3rd party contract for environmental baseline data gathering
  - Continue to fill vacancies on the project interdisciplinary team
  - Revise and update fencing segment GIS data and refine proposed action and alternatives
- In Winter 2020:
- Cultural resources contractors begin data gathering
  - Reach out, as needed, to agencies to discuss routes identified
  - Initial cooperators meetings to refine purpose and need and alternatives.

Additional details are available in the presentation at the link in the footer.

#### **7. 2020 Report on Mojave Desert Tortoise Line Distance Sampling<sup>1</sup>**

Linda Allison, Desert Tortoise Monitoring Coordinator, FWS, gave an update on the range-wide monitoring program. An analysis of population trends between 2004 and 2014 was published in 2018 and documented ongoing declines in four of the five recovery units, with the Northeast Mojave Recovery Unit the exception with increasing trends. Two individual conservation areas (Joshua Tree NP and Piute Valley) in the Colorado Desert Recovery Unit had increasing trends even though the average trend for the recovery unit was declining. Across all recovery units, juvenile tortoises appear to be declining.

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<sup>1</sup> (see presentation at [https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert\\_tortoise/dtro/dtro\\_meet\\_events.html](https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dtro/dtro_meet_events.html))

In 2020, surveys were initiated in California prior to COVID-19 restrictions and were able to be completed, but surveys in Nevada and Arizona had to be cancelled. The planned surveys in the latter two states will be completed in 2021, as well as surveys in Upper Virgin River. Surveys in California are contingent on final funding amounts. *For planning purposes, Linda needs a verbal commitment for funding by the end of the calendar year and funds transferred no later than the end of January.* Linda plans to update the trend analysis following the 2021 surveys, at which time each of the conservation areas will have at least three additional surveys since the 2014 trend analysis.

#### **8. Recovery Network and Connectivity White Paper**

Todd Esque, USGS, and Roy Averill-Murray provided an overview of a draft white paper on desert tortoise population connectivity (available at [https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert\\_tortoise/dtro/dtro\\_meet\\_events.html](https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/dtro/dtro_meet_events.html)), which is a product of the session requested by the MOG at last October's meeting. The white paper provides an overview of the basic concepts of connectivity of desert tortoise populations, recent research informing our understanding of population connectivity, and management implications relevant to connectivity and recovery of the species. Feedback is requested to Todd and Roy by 30 October, after which it will be finalized as a USGS open file report.

#### **9. Sonoran Desert Tortoise Listing Settlement**

Brian Wooldridge, Arizona Ecological Service Office, FWS: Petitioners filed a complaint in September 2019 to reconsider the 2015 not-warranted finding for listing the Sonoran Desert Tortoise under the Endangered Species Act. FWS entered into a settlement agreement with the petitioners to reconsider the finding and to develop a new 12-month finding as to whether the Sonoran Desert Tortoise warrants listing as an endangered or threatened species. As a result of that agreement, the FWS is withdrawing the 2015 12-month finding and have returned the Sonoran Desert Tortoise back to the candidate list, and has agreed to submit to the Federal Register a new 12-month petition finding on the status of the species within 18 months of the court order—by February 3, 2022. Part of the analysis includes clearly defining the boundary between Mohave Desert Tortoises and Sonoran Desert Tortoises in the area of the Black Mountains in Arizona, east of the Colorado River. Recent genetic research has helped clarify the extent of Mohave Desert Tortoises in this area and will be valuable for the analysis. This will also help the FWS determine how best to manage those Mohave Desert Tortoises in Arizona, east of the Colorado River, relative to the currently listed portion of the range.

#### **10. Review of Action Items**

See Action Item Tracking Report below.

#### **11. Public Comments**

Richard Spotts addressed the importance of the range of alternatives analyzed in NEPA, especially relative to the Washington County Northern Corridor project. He expressed concern about the reliance on related new CEQ regulations that are the subject of three major lawsuits and the apparent constriction of purpose and need to a narrow set of alternatives. Secondly, he acknowledged that a lot of good information was presented in the meeting and expressed hope that it's applied by managers to further desert tortoise recovery.

**12. Closing Comments/Future Agenda Items/Next Meeting Date**

- a. Future agenda items (see below)
- b. Meeting evaluations were elicited via an online survey 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.

	<b>Suggested Future Agenda Items</b>
<b>1</b>	Effects Pathways Manager and consultation tool in FWS ECOS (suggested at previous meeting)
<b>2</b>	RSPI update and feedback (Walter Christiansen, Brian Croft suggested at previous meeting)
<b>3</b>	Consistent mitigation strategies
<b>4</b>	Update on Recovery Action Tracking Tool
<b>5</b>	Announce availability of final connectivity white paper
<b>6</b>	Climate change impacts and desert tortoise resiliency
<b>7</b>	Listing status of Mohave desert tortoises in the Black Mountains area of Arizona, east of the Colorado River
<b>8</b>	Update on the outcome of the Mojave Desert Tortoise Road Ecology Workshops

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

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Title/Office</b>
Clark County	Kimberley Jenkins	Principal Environmental Specialist Desert Conservation Program
QuadState Local Governments Authority	Gerry Hillier	Executive Director
Nye County	Darrell Lacy	Community Development Director
Washington County	Cameron Rognan	HCP Administrator
Nevada Department of Wildlife	Matt Flores	Wildlife Staff Specialist
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources	Ann McLuckie	Wildlife Biologist
Arizona Game and Fish Department	Cristina Jones	Turtles Project Coordinator
BLM, Arizona	Jerry Davis	Arizona Deputy State Director, Resources and Planning
BLM, California	Karen Mouritsen	California State Director
BLM, Nevada	Alan Sheppard	Acting Nevada Deputy State Director
BLM, Utah	Keith Rigtrup	St. George Field Manager
BLM, HQ	Amy Fesnock	Acting National Threatened and Endangered Species Program Lead
Death Valley National Park	Mark Sappington	Chief of Resources and Science
Lake Mead National Recreation Area	Margaret Goodro	Superintendent
Mojave National Preserve	Debra Hughson	Chief of Science and Resource Stewardship
Tule Springs National Monument	Erin Eichenberg	Integrated Resources Program Manager
FWS, Legacy Region 8	Mike Fris	Assistant Regional Director, Ecological Services
FWS, Legacy Region 2	Jeff Humphrey	Field Supervisor, Arizona Ecological Services Office
FWS, Legacy Region 6	Yvette Converse	Field Supervisor, Utah Ecological Services Field 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	Brian Henen	Natural Resource Officer
Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center	Benjamin Leslie	Natural Resources Specialist
Marine Corps Logistics Base Ft. Irwin	Dave Houseman	Natural Resources Specialist
Nellis Air Force Base	Anna Johnson	Natural Resources Program Manager

**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 2019 Feb#01	Send information on your non-RIT Recovery Actions to Flo Deffner ( <a href="mailto:Flo_Deffner@fws.gov">Flo_Deffner@fws.gov</a> )	All	Closed (lack of input)
Item 2020 Oct#01	By end of calendar year, 12/31, provide input on MOG executive session outline for Spring 2021 meeting	All	Open
Item 2020 Oct#02	Post the final version of Charter on DTRO website	Glen Knowles	Closed (Posted)

Item Date / No.	<u>Action Item</u>	Assigned To / Due Date	Status
Item 2020 Oct#03	Provide verbal commitment for monitoring funding to Linda Allison by end December; transfer funds NLT end January	All	Open
Item 2020 Oct#04	Add a paragraph about impacts of fencing to DT connectivity white paper; add co-authors	Todd Esque Roy Averill- Murray	Open
Item 2020 Oct#05	Provide input on connectivity white paper to Todd Esque and Roy Averill-Murray, especially on areas that could use more clarification or elaboration (Oct 30)	All	Open
Item 2020 Oct#06	Provide list of priority fencing sections for the programmatic NEPA and post to DTRO website	Kerry Holcomb	Open