

Mojave Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group Webinar Summary January 30, 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 January 30, 2020. Glen Knowles (USFWS) reviewed the agenda and Action Item Tracking Report. The call was attended by a diverse group of approximately 50 people including MOG executives, managers, staff, and interested parties.

Upcoming Meetings

- *MOG meeting:* April 29, 2020, Springs Preserve, Las Vegas, Nevada

Meeting Summary

Update on Programmatic NEPA for Roadway Fencing to Reduce Mojave Desert Tortoise Mortality: Matthew Magaletti, Regional NEPA Support Team, Bureau of Land Management
Matt gave a presentation on current status of the effort. He reviewed the four options presented to the MOG at the October meeting: Option 1: Programmatic NEPA for all roadway fencing in NV, CA, UT, and AZ; Option 2: Conduct site-specific NEPA analysis for priority fence installation projects and a programmatic NEPA analysis for the remaining 2,883 miles; Option 3: Conduct site-specific NEPA analysis for priority fence installation projects on private, CSLC, and Federally managed lands in NV and CA, programmatic NEPA analysis for 1,848 miles of road within these same states, and a screening process for potential projects in UT and AZ; Option 4: Team does not conduct any analysis. Matt explained that the MOG selected Option 3, but chose to include UT and AZ roadways as well, and that on December 20, 2020 Raul Morales notified the MOG that the BLM will pursue the amended option 3. Matt reviewed the purpose and need statement and next steps: identify team members and project scope and budget by February 2020, finalize section 106 and cooperator agreements, and award third party contract for data gathering and NEPA support by April 2020, and initiate cooperator meetings and scoping in May 2020.

Matt then described the proposed governance for the effort, made up of four teams: 1, Decision Makers Group (decision makers from impacted states and federal agencies that makes decisions on approving project charter, proposed action, scoping timeframe, and changes to project descriptions once the proposed action and alternatives have been approved); 2, Working Group (NEPA Support Team, contractor(s), designated specialists from other impacted state and federal agencies that will write the NEPA and related documents and provide data to contractors); 3, Public Outreach Team (public affairs specialists from interested/affected agencies, will put together scoping and public comment materials to include); and 4, NEPA Team (BLM state NEPA leads and other NEPA planners from other affected federal agencies, assure NEPA and

CEQA adequacy). Matt asked if the MOG members supported the proposed governance structure, and there was general support. Glen and Matt will send an email to the MOG requesting the MOG submit agency representatives for the four teams.

Andrew Archuleta asked why the effort would be an EIS, and Matt responded that it doesn't have to be, and the level of NEPA will be determined in scoping. Gerry Hillier asked about funding sources for implementation, Roy explained that there are multiple funding sources available, and Walter Christensen added that the RSPI effort may also lead to an important funding source. Matt's presentation will be made available with this meeting summary on the DTRO's webpage.

Common Raven Predation Pressure on TechnoTorts in the Fremont-Kramer Critical Habitat Unit (CHU): Kerry Holcomb, Biologist, US Fish and Wildlife Service Palm Springs Fish and Wildlife Office

Kerry provided a presentation on preliminary results of raven predation observance on technotorts (3d-printed models simulating juvenile tortoises) in the Fremont-Kramer CHU. Raven population density has exploded throughout the western US over the past 40 years due to human food and nesting subsidies, and raven predation is thought to be a primary source of mortality for juvenile desert tortoises, particularly in the Western Mojave Recovery Unit. Initial observation results of raven interaction with technotorts indicated that juvenile tortoises have a 1 in 3 chance of being "visited" (which likely equates to preyed upon) by a raven each week, and that, extrapolated to a weekly survivorship estimate of 83.33%, will reduce a population of 1,000 juvenile tortoises to 0 in 40 weeks. These results indicate that, absent any other stressors, raven predation alone may be eliminating recruitment in the Fremont-Kramer CHU. Kerry has also provided this information to the "Raven Core Team" which consists of DOI and non-DOI partners and is being incorporated into planning for raven management across the West.

Lisa Nordstrom said that Edwards AFB will be conducting a similar study to assess raven pressure. Del Abdalla asked if we can really tell raven mortality from other sources such as vehicle mortality. Kerry and Flo responded that raven and vehicle mortality are very distinctive, raven predation is typically evidenced by a hole in the top of the plastron, vehicle mortality is usually evidenced by much more catastrophic injuries to the animal.

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

Brian reviewed the history of this initiative, which is a high priority for USFWS and Department of Defense (DoD). The goal is to provide greater mission flexibility for installations while also providing a more streamlined approach to contributing to recovery. The Mojave Desert Tortoise is one of 10 species in our area (all in California) that are included in this partnership. FWS is leading the development of brief implementation plans on 3-5 year time frames (preferably 1-2 years) for these species, which will be approved by DOI and DoD leadership. The desert tortoise plan is intended to dovetail with the MOG/RIT process with hopes to develop more flexible funding mechanisms that will allow DoD to support recovery actions outside their installations.

The tortoise initiative consists of two components: 1) consultations with DOD installations to streamline changes in training (to be completed in 2020), and 2) a defined recovery commitment

aligned with MOG priorities via a 5-year action plan and an implementation plan. Identified resource needs and costs for actions in the plans include highway fencing, land acquisition, route closures, habitat restoration, seed sources, and enforcement. They have also developed a map of geographic focus areas within the western Mojave that Brian shared with the group, but emphasized that this doesn't exclude other areas from consideration, and they are working on a centralized NFWF account to fund recovery actions. They are also working to fund a coordinator position specifically for the FWS desert tortoise effort. They are currently waiting on feedback from DOD on the FWS vision, and will provide additional updates as the effort progresses at future MOG meetings.

Gerry pointed out that the effort has many other species across the country that will be competing for resources. Walter said that DOD is looking to fund the effort for desert tortoise with an upfront commitment of \$14.8 million via a REPI Challenge Grant and at a sustained annual amount of \$2.7 million from appropriated base operational funds.

2019 Dingell Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act Update: Brian Croft and Roy Averill-Murray, Coordinator, Desert Tortoise Recovery Program

Brian provided an update for Dingell Act section 1452 which concerns completion of a study within 2 years of enactment (i.e., March 12, 2021) to assess the impacts of habitat fragmentation on wildlife corridors, species migration, survival, plants, insects, animals, soils, air quality, and water quantity/quality. The study is required to identify critical wildlife corridors and make recommendations for conservation to both DOI and DOD. These recommendations will be considered in making individual ROW decisions within the California Desert Conservation Area and will be incorporated into DOI land use plans in the California Desert Conservation Area. The FWS, as lead agency for this task, worked with BLM, who completed an RFP, evaluated proposals, and awarded two contracts. These include one contract to analyze highway wildlife mortalities to ensure the connectivity network incorporates these high crossing areas (UC Davis) and another to re-evaluate existing connectivity models, develop new base layers as needed and to conduct multiple model runs adapting to various management scenarios (Conservation Science Partners). Both contracts have planned deliverables by December 2020, prior to the law requiring completion within two years (March 2021). BLM, USFWS, and Conservation Science Partners had a conference call on December 17 to discuss next steps under the connectivity modeling contract. Conservation Science Partners identified potential modeling methodologies and a preliminary suite of species to address for connectivity. BLM and USFWS provided feedback during the call and are going to follow up with additional input on the species list.

Roy gave an update on section 1461 of the Dingell Act, which concerns establishing a new desert tortoise conservation center (DTCC). FWS has embarked on scoping with necessary and potential partners (e.g., BLM, Clark County, Nevada Department of Wildlife, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, San Diego Zoo Global) on the location, infrastructure needs, and vision and scope of a new DTCC. Results from this scoping will be used to develop infrastructure construction plans and budgets. Out-year activities will include construction, opening, and operation of the DTCC. FWS met with BLM on September 19, 2019 to scope the infrastructure needs of the new DTCC. Two sites on BLM owned-land were identified, which include the old DTCC in Las Vegas, plus a satellite site at Ivanpah Solar Electricity Generating Station in California. The satellite site has pens that may be used for temporary holding of

tortoises from California, which may be beneficial during any pending approval by the State wildlife agencies for the inter-state transport of tortoises. FWS was identified as the responsible agency for implementation at the DTCC. The inter-agency team are currently assessing the logistics of use of the BLM sites, to include transfer or lease of the land to FWS, as well as assessing the operation and maintenance costs. Continued discussions are needed to identify issues, constraints, and protocols to allow the DTCC to transfer tortoises across state lines. The San Diego Zoo has expressed interest in collaborating on the new DTCC. FWS has scheduled a scoping meeting with BLM (CA and NV), NDOW, CDFW, Clark County, and the San Diego Zoo on February 20 to discuss infrastructure needs to accomplish the objectives of the DTCC as identified in the Act; identify issues, constraints, and protocols to allow the DTCC to transfer tortoises across state lines; and additional steps needed to successfully implement this provision of the Act.

MOG Charter: Glen Knowles

Glen explained the current MOG charter was established in 2015 and calls for review and revision at least every 5 years, so FWS intends to work with the MOG to complete this task in 2020. Glen reviewed the existing charter, explaining that it has a vision that is stepped down into a mission statement that focuses on 1) coordination, 2) information sharing, and 3) providing a forum for stakeholder input, and that the charter also includes a duties and activities section, defines the specific membership of the MOG, and guidelines for stakeholder involvement. Glen suggested that the MOG may want to focus on its mission, should the MOG continue to focus on coordination, or should it take on a more direct role in desert tortoise recovery; an example would be to have a funding element such that the MOG acts to direct funding through specific sources, some of which already exist, others that could be developed, through an annual work plan. Glen also suggested changes to MOG membership to add transportation agencies and possibly others, addressing meeting frequency (should we continue MOG webinars?), and refining guidelines for stakeholder involvement to reflect actual current practice within the MOG.

Gerry stated that he felt few if any changes to the MOG Charter were needed, and that FWS should decide who should be signatories. Walter indicated MCAGCC is not currently a signatory, but should be. Walter also asked if the MOG's current role is consistent with the Federal Advisory Committee Act; Glen said that it is, and that it is expressly stated in the current charter that the MOG is not a FACA committee. Glen asked that MOG members and stakeholders send him input on what changes they would like to see in the revised charter, and said that FWS would bring this back to the MOG at its April meeting.

Review of Action Items

No major action items were identified, but a) Glen and Matt will send out an email to MOG members calling for nominations for the teams for the Mojave desert tortoise roadway fencing programmatic NEPA effort as described, b) Glen will work with DOD members to improve information sharing and address technical difficulties of transmitting files between agencies, and c) Glen requested MOG members contact him with any ideas on ways to improve or revise the MOG charter. The Action Item Tracking Report and MOG/RIT Panning Cycle are attached.

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.

| 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 (Flo_Deffner@fws.gov) | All | Open |
| Item 2019 Feb#02 | Report annually on range-wide line distance sampling surveys | Glen Knowles | Open |
| 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 Date / No. | <u>Action Item</u> | Assigned To / Due Date | Status |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|--------|
| 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 | Closed |

Attachment 2: MOG/RIT Cycle

