

# MOG Executives Report Out and Member Updates

Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group

October 3, 2024 | Zoom Meeting

## Introduction

In the document below, MOG Members have provided:

- **High-priority actions** they have been implementing related to restoration, predator management, highway fencing, and monitoring.
- **Needs** they have for accomplishing their goals, especially that could be provided through collaboration with other partners.

A synthesis of these updates by category can be viewed [here](#). Updates submitted by the deadline were included in the synthesis.

## MOG Executives Report Out and Member Updates

### Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

BLM Arizona State Office - *Tiffany Shepherd, Wildlife Program Lead. MOG Executive: Raymond Sauzo, State Director*

Completed a project to install pipe rail fence and tortoise fencing near Mesquite, NV.

- Applying herbicides to establish fuel breaks within tortoise habitat.
- Maintaining the tortoise fencing along Highway 91.

### BLM California State Office

- In FY 2024, the California Desert District (CDD) funded USGS to resurvey and analyze the two long-term desert tortoise study plots in the Chemehuevi CHU. The CDD also funded the University of Nevada, Reno to establish the second of three 1-km<sup>2</sup> demographic plots in the Chemehuevi CHU.
- In FY 2024, the CDD acquired approximately 2,500 acres in the Superior-Cronese and Chemehuevi CHUs using Land and Water Conservation funds, working with the Mojave Desert Land Trust.

### BLM Nevada State Office – *Alan Shepherd*

- Summer FY 2024 The Las Vegas Field Office is completing BLM review and incorporation of public comments received on the Northern Ivanpah Valley Desert Tortoise Habitat Connectivity and Restoration Project and Environmental Assessment.
- The Las Vegas Field Office has completed Raven surveys on Transmission lines in Southern Nevada.

- The Southern Nevada District is supporting the Desert Tortoise Recovery Office in post-translocation monitoring as outlined in the 2022 revised Translocation Plan for the Stump Springs Regional Augmentation Site.

BLM Utah State Office – *Aaron Roe*

- During FY24 St. George Field (SGFO) Staff continues on the ground restoration efforts including:
  - Out-planting and maintaining container grown native plants within fire-damaged critical habitat
  - Treating non-native plants with herbicide at trailheads and along road edges.
- In first quarter of FY25 SGFO will aerially treat 100 acres with Imazapic to control non-native bromes and create/enhance firebreaks and manually treat 25-100 acres with Imazapic and Indaziflam
- In FY24 SGFO worked with the Washington County HCP and FWS to conduct raven point count surveys to determine raven density and raven-Mojave desert tortoise predation pressure within the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit
- In FY24 SGFO constructed and repaired tortoise-exclusion fencing along the Red Cliffs NCA boundary and interior roads
- During first quarter of FY25 SGFO will construct 3.5 miles of new tortoise-exclusion fencing with the Red Cliffs NCA

National T&E Lead – *Laura Romin*

- Continue working on BLM MDT Strategic Plan - in review with BLM biologists this month.
- Ongoing section 7 consultation Solar PEIS.

US Fish and Wildlife Service

USFWS Region 2 (Arizona) - *Brianna Fogel*

- Currently in Section 7 consultation with the BLM on the Tassi-Gold Butte Herd Management Area (HMA) Wild Burro Gather Plan in Mohave County for the MDT and its critical habitat.
- Investigating possible different sources of funding to conduct surveying efforts in NW Arizona for Mojave/Sonoran/hybrid tortoises
- Communicating with DTRO about the BLM Solar PEIS plan to develop in the Black Mountains in AZ, a likely hybrid/pure zone for MDT. The plan did not include protection for MDT and SDT in the area outside of critical habitat.

USFWS Region 6 (Utah) – *George Weekley*

- In response to litigation and a settlement agreement with the plaintiffs, we will be releasing the Final Supplemental EIS to reconsider the Northern Corridor Highway and associated amendment to the Washington County ITP this fall.

USFWS Region 8 (Nevada) – *Glen Knowles*

- Working on developing/improving conservation measures for renewable energy/utility scale solar and mining projects with BLM and other partners.
- Recently completed ESA section 7 consultation with BLM on the Dry Lake East Energy Center, a 200 mW solar energy facility on 800 acres northeast of Las Vegas in Clark County in April. Also completed consultation on the Rough Hat Clark Solar Project, a 400 MW facility on 2,400 acres in the Pahrump Valley in Clark County in June. Currently in section 7 consultation with BLM on the Solar PEIS.
- Working with BLM to evaluate solar energy facilities that maintain habitat under the panels. In April, 48 adult desert tortoises were released into the 7,000-acre Gemini Solar Facility.
- Continuing our work with the Great Basin Institute and Nevada Department of Wildlife on a regional effort to monitor and potentially develop control strategies and implement control methods for common raven in southern Nevada.
- Working on implementing a study with BLM to evaluate the thermal and environmental conditions (e.g., precipitation, temperature, humidity, etc.) associated with varying solar facility designs in Mojave desert tortoise habitat.

USFWS (Palm Springs) – *Brian Croft*

- Desert Tortoise Week began with kickoff events this past Sat., September 28. Total of 14 events scheduled this year and some great social media posts already by the Service and other conservation partners. This is the first year for a website with events and looking to move next year's events to November when the desert weather is cooler.
- Proposal for a desert tortoise population augmentation site is in the works with BLM, CDFW and other agencies. Proposed site is between the Orocopia and Chuckwalla Mountains. Final draft proposal is in review and working to address any concerns.
- Continuing to coordinate with the Army on translocation planning for Fort Irwin's Western Training Area in advance of the Army opening this area up for training.
- Currently working with the BLM on permitting 4 utility-scale solar projects: Easley (~2,000 acres), Sapphire (~1,100 acres), Redonda (~3,400 acres), and Lycan (~5,000 acres). These projects are within DFA's and will likely be streamlined under the DRECP biological opinion.
- Issued a desert tortoise incidental take permit for the Desert Breeze Solar project on private lands near Harper Lake. Currently working on review of an application for a desert tortoise incidental take permit for another solar project in the same area.
- Continuing to work with DoD on the desert tortoise RASP partnership and the Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape.
- Working on release of the desert tortoise General Conservation Plan and EIS for public comment. We anticipate release by the end of the calendar year.

USFWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Office – *Kristina Drake*

- Since Spring 2024, DTRO has continued to work with partners to support tortoise recovery efforts across the Mojave and Colorado Desert ecoregions including desert tortoise fencing, signage, habitat restoration, and route density impacts. DTRO is seeking funding to support updated tortoise population viability analysis relative to environmental stressors to understand tortoise demography, survivorship, etc. Additionally, we have collated results and requests from the Recovery and Implementation Teams (RITs) across the range of the tortoise (presentation provided by Kerry Holcomb).
- Solar Planning - Worked with BLM, USGS, BIA, DOE, DoD, counties, and others to improve the planning, siting, implementation, minimization, and mitigation related to utility-scale solar energy development and assisted in developing a monitoring framework to support this work ([presentation](#) provided by Kristina Drake today).
- Monitoring Program - Established 4 new tortoise demographic plots in September/October 2024 (2 in Eastern Mojave at Stump Springs and Trout Canyon, Nevada (funded by FWS); 2 in the Western Mojave at Superior-Cronese East and Fremont-Kramer, California (funded by the RASP; [presentation](#) provided by Corey Mitchell today).
- Raven Program - Working with partners to monitor and manage ravens in CA, NV, & UT including obtaining permits, data collection and analysis, and projected work in 2025 ([presentation](#) provided by Kerry Holcomb today).
- Guidance Document - Drafted a guidance document to improve the temporary housing of wild tortoises with related details on tortoise husbandry, permits, and reporting. Document is expected to be released on our website later this Fall.
- Population Augmentation - Working with partners and land managers to identify larger intact connected landscapes with reduced human impacts to increase tortoise density and promote demography at viable thresholds.
- Positive Headstarting Anecdote: An adult female tortoise that was originally head-started in 2004 at Edwards AFB (USGS; K Berry and colleagues) was returned to the wild in 2014 as a 10 year old. This tortoise was shown to be reproductive at 19 years in 2023 and successfully reproduced again in spring 2024. All six hatchlings from the 2024 nest survived, are being head-started at The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens, and are serving as the second phase of head-starting with the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (Merrick and colleagues).

National Park Service (NPS)

Death Valley National Park – *Kevin Wilson*

- Greenwater Valley camping sites have been designated and “drive like a tortoise” signs installed.
- In consultation with Kerry Holcomb and observation of a park staff member of deceased juvenile tortoises, Death Valley NP should develop a raven management plan to reduce predation.

- Tortoise field notes along with photographs of desert tortoises found in Greenwater Valley (autumn 2023 - spring 2024) were provided to Kerry Holcomb. This information was collected by a Death Valley employee that visits Greenwater Valley on their own time.

Joshua Tree National Park – *Michael Vamstead and Sheri Shiflett, Ph.D.*

- Joshua Tree NP staff and volunteers continue a long-term telemetry program to monitor desert tortoise near roads
- This year the Park introduced the use of data loggers on our tortoises. It is an advancement over traditional telemetry data as it gathers location data at a 10-15 minute interval rather than a couple of times a month. Plans are to expand the use of these loggers in the spring.
- JOTR will be participating in Desert Tortoise week at VCs and on social media
- Additional road signs and road stencils to raise tortoise awareness were installed/painted this past spring and summer
- A desert tortoise nested in a popular campground this season and staff responded by closing down a small area to protect it. Eventually the nest hatched and six nestling tortoises were re-homed to a location nearby, but out of danger from campground related activities.

Mojave National Preserve – *Michael Burchett*

- MOJA is approaching the 70% design phase of Kelso-Cima Road and South Kelbaker Road reconstruction project. This project will include significant stretches of tortoise exclusion fencing and tortoise crossings. Morning Star Mine Road will be downgraded to an unpaved surface as part of the project.
- Gabby Barnas has moved on to a PhD candidate position. She has been running the day-to-day operations at the Ivanpah Desert Tortoise Research Facility for the past 4 years and we are really missing her. They are currently working on backfilling her position and MOJA has stepped in to take care of the headstarted tortoises and the facility for a short time until new staff comes on.
- MOJA had a few close calls this summer with wildfire. We had a few small lights from lightning and target shooting but our fire and law enforcement staff knocked them down quickly.
- 2024 brought excessive road mortality in the Preserve. This included mortalities documented along Mojave Road, a popular 4x4 route that goes through MOJA. We are beginning to look at previous road closures and rehab projects to see how they are holding up, and identifying redundant routes that could potentially be closed or rehabbed.
- We performed egg-oiling on raven nets on SCE installations and other areas with the help of Beth Wolff's crew. That was great work, and we hope to continue raven monitoring and treatments in the future years.
- And lastly, Cima Road is set to reopen next month after a year-long reconstruction project. Desert tortoises will be a big part of the conversation since the project installed 5 miles of tortoise exclusion fencing. We are monitoring the new fence. We have found tortoises along the corridor and will be translocating headstarted tortoises behind the fence in years ahead.

## Department of Defense (DOD)

### Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake (NAWSCL) – *Julie Hendrix*

- Dept of Navy legal - Court adjudicating water rights under Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) for the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority (IWVGA) Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP). Strong tie into NAWSCL raven management due to adjacent (outside Navy boundary) NAWSCL north range land use (agricultural, Kern City, pistachios and alfalfa). If ag is discontinued/decreased, then raven population movement is likely to occur.
- Continuing regular tortoise monitoring and presence/absence surveys. Approximately one to two thousand acres of 100% coverage survey over 10-14 days in both fall and spring annually. Focus on areas adjacent to higher traffic roads, but also looking across a variety of modeled suitable habitat and considering potential climate change shifts over multiple tortoise generations. Planning line distance sampling survey support in spring 2025 on NAWSCL south range.
- 2022 demographic plot (USGS/DTRO) scheduled for 2025 repeat, funding awarded. 2022 data still in review, submitted for possible publication (Esque et al). 2019-2022 USGS Randsburg Wash Road tortoise movement study data analysis still in work (Esque et al).
- Navy drones may be available and project proposal in work through Naval Facilities Command's GIS department.
- Implementing NAWSCL draft Raven Management Plan actions (adapted from 2022 Interagency PEA): raven point count surveys, outreach/education, subsidy mapping/monitoring/reduction/elimination. Still need MBTA depredation permit and appreciate assist from USDA APHIS WS for approved lethal actions.
- Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape - involved and tracking (John Kersey, NAWSCL Community Liason and Public Affairs Officer (CLPO) is POC)
- New NAWSCL Public Affairs Officer - planning 2024 Desert Tortoise Week public outreach
- Tracking multiple species (Joshua tree, Mohave ground squirrel, burrowing owl, pinyon jay, pollinators, others) within tortoise habitat. Involved in ongoing RASP discussions/actions and JT and CORA working groups.
- Would like to plan to engage more with other DoD installations in future, especially Ft Irwin and EAFB (due to shared boundary and northwestern Mojave location)
- October 2024 horse and burro gather canceled, reschedule pending. Burros having greater impact on NAWSCL south range tortoise habitat.

### Marine Corps Air Station, Yuma -

- Completed line distance sampling surveys in spring on the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range
- Continuing to implement conservation measures identified in the 1996 BO and amendments including desert tortoise briefings for all range users, 20 mph speed limits within critical habitat, raven management, etc.

Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MGACC), Twentynine Palms - *Brian Henen*

- Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape (MDSL) - The official designation was announced 15May24, and represents the first SL for California, and the largest area (ca. 3.5M acres). We are excited about this partnership and have held one preliminary meeting with CNRA and many of the draft steering committee to help draft the organization structure of the MDSL partnership.
- RASP for Desert Tortoise - several partners helped evaluate proposals for the 2024 RFP.
- Translocation and headstarting efforts are proceeding, with a survival analysis for headstarting to soon lead to manuscript preparation for a scientific journal.

National Training Center, Fort Irwin – *Dave Housman*

- Completed a NEPA action (EA) for translocation of desert tortoises from Fort Irwin's Western Training Area (WTA).
- Currently conducting clearance surveys in the WTA and translocation to augment the tortoise population in the Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP) focal area south of Fort Irwin.
- Also, working with the installation Directorate of Emergency Services to have a Conservation Law Enforcement Officer (CLEO) presence around Army-owned parcels found in the RASP focal area.
- Continuing to work with Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue on burro round-ups at Fort Irwin to reduce their impact on natural resources, including the seeps and springs used by year-round native as well as migratory species.
- Upgrading fencing around Lane Mountain milk-vetch conservation areas on Fort Irwin.

Department of Transportation

Federal Highway Administration – *Abdelmoez (Del) Abdalla*

- Since USFWS renewed the PBO on April 18, 2022, issues of compliance has been reduced dramatically.
- FHWA is eager to know what additional tasks you would like us to participate in/funds on programmatic level.
- Most of NDOT's activities such as monitoring, fencing, and research with Desert Tortoise are part of FHWA's activities.
- The FHWA's technical team will provide training on October 10, 2024 in Section 7 of the ESA. Please contact Criag Greg ([CCrick@dot.nv.gov](mailto:CCrick@dot.nv.gov)) to register.

State Wildlife Agencies

Arizona Game and Fish Department - *Tom Jones*

- Seeking funding opportunities to support demographic survey efforts on previously established long-term monitoring plots on the Arizona Strip.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife – *Alisa Ellsworth*

- Brandy Wood is the new Renewable Energy Environmental Program Manager in Region 6.
- Region 6 Lands program is working on an inventory of roads and opportunities for restoration of closed roads that will benefit Desert Tortoise and other species on the West Mojave Ecological Reserve.
- The Fish and Game Commission decided to uplist Desert Tortoise from Threatened to Endangered on April 18, 2024. The Findings have not yet been published.
- The call for Section 6 grant proposals is anticipated to be published in mid-November.

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources – *Ann McLuckie, Desert Tortoise Biologist; MOG Executive: J. Shirley, Division Director*

- Working with BLM and Utah State Parks to Install/upgrade up to 5 miles of boundary fencing in the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (RCNCA) and Snow Canyon State Park.
- Working with Washington County and BLM to apply herbicide and preemergent to targeted areas within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve (Reserve; e.g., UDWR and SITLA lands) and RCNCA.
- Monitoring desert tortoise road collisions along major roadways in the Reserve and RCNCA.
- Implementing the Desert Tortoise Translocation Management Plan, releasing displaced tortoises from construction sites to a designated release site in the RCNCA.
- Working with BLM to secure funding for the desert tortoise long-term monitoring program within the RCNCA.

County Governments

Clark County, Nevada – *Kimberley Jenkins*

- Restoration
  - Continued restoration planning efforts for the restoration of up to 725 linear disturbance segments within the Piute-Eldorado Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC); the final restoration plan is scheduled to be complete in February 2025 and restoration implementation will begin in late 2025.
  - Continued planning efforts for restoration, weed treatment, clean-up activities, and fence installation within the Rainbow Gardens ACEC; implementation is anticipated to begin mid-2025.
  - Continuing the re-evaluation of desert tortoise habitat restoration sites to examine long-term effectiveness of varying restoration techniques; this project will be complete in mid-2025.
- Predator Management
  - Subsidized predator management efforts around the Boulder City Conservation Easement (BCCE) were initiated earlier this year. Initial accomplishments include: installing laser deterrents at the Boulder City landfill and sewage ponds; completed surveys for raven and raptor nests; installed Techno-Torts near subsidy sites; and

completed the first year of raven egg oiling operations. Project activities are scheduled to continue through mid-2026

- Highway Fencing
  - Continue the Road Warriors project, a collaborative effort to conduct roadway mortality surveys, routine fence and connectivity culvert inspections, and to perform minor maintenance activities; major maintenance needs are coordinated with Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT) maintenance crews.
  - Provided a letter of support and funding match commitment to support NDOT's grant application under the Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program; if awarded, this project would include the installation of approximately 33 miles of new desert tortoise exclusionary fencing along U.S. 93 through the Coyote Springs ACEC.
- Monitoring
  - Completed another season of range-wide line distance sampling to monitor tortoise population trends within Tortoise Conservation Areas occurring in Clark County, Nevada.
  - Completed our 11<sup>th</sup> year of tortoise occupancy sampling on the BCCE. We analyzed the last 10 years of data and have found no declining trends in occupancy across the easement.
  - Initiated a pilot project to test the efficacy of drones to detect tortoises as a potential alternative to traditional occupancy surveys. The first year saw limited success and we will be adjusting methods next year to try to improve these outcomes.
  - Received notice to proceed from the SNPLMA program for a project funded under Round 19 to collect demography data on established plots located in Clark County; field collection activities are anticipated to begin in fall of 2025.

#### Washington County, Utah – *Cameron Rognan*

- Due to the Northern Corridor lawsuit, we are anticipating a possible incidental take permit amendment by US Fish and Wildlife Service which may eliminate Zone 6 of the Reserve (6,812 acres) and authorize half of those lands for development. Utah state trust lands have already submitted a request for proposals to develop their lands in Zone 6, pending a final decision from BLM / USFWS next month.
- Continue raven monitoring and egg-oiling in and around the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.
- Considering partnership with Black Desert Resort to support additional tortoise education opportunities and possible population augmentation.
- Continue to move tortoises out of developing areas to new translocation site in the Reserve.
- Completed new fire and fuels management plan. Working on implementing a variety of treatment plans this winter to establish fuel breaks and restore burned areas.
- Working with BLM and Water Conservancy District for a land exchange which would result in 89-acre Reserve inholding being acquired by BLM.
- Supported funding for local artist to paint large tortoise mural in downtown St. George.
- Participated in several activities in support of desert tortoise week.

## Other

### The Living Desert Zoo & Gardens – *Katie Shaw, Conservation Social Scientist*

- Time to Talk Trash campaign for raven management ongoing in Barstow and currently taking place in Victorville. New challenge of dumpsters + food waste bins. Surprisingly high closure rates in Victorville. We will be collecting data from food-related businesses as we go around and talk to them that will hopefully provide better insights.
- Gearing up for a lot of outreach with OHV users about recreating in desert tortoise habitat. We've connected with many OHV groups and users and have realized there is limited to no messaging about the desert tortoise. We've made outreach materials that we are happy to share. We've also identified other ongoing challenges with OHV outreach.
- The 2024/2025 cohort of hatchlings from Edwards Air Force Base have finished hatching and are all in their mesocosms. We have a total of 75 hatchlings plus a few nonviable eggs. Comparing weights and carapace lengths from the last two cohorts to this one, these hatchlings are a bit heavier and longer, on average, than past years. Hatchlings in this cohort have been very active and have great appetites. Their next set of monthly measurements are coming up and we hope their growth rates will be comparable to the 2022/2023 cohort, or higher. As we head into October, they will also be partaking in the first set of blood draws.

### Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP) - *Clay Noss*

- Clay Noss began as RASP coordinator in July 2024. Focused on making RASP as effective as possible by connecting the many partners and evaluating conservation actions to date.
- I am administratively housed within the Mojave Desert Land Trust (a RASP partner) but responsibilities are to the RASP program as a whole and making sure it is working for tortoise conservation.
- Email - [clay.noss@mdlt.org](mailto:clay.noss@mdlt.org) . Please reach out to me if you are involved in RASP or would like to be.