

Update on the Development of a General Conservation Plan for the Desert Tortoise in California



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Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group Meeting – October 2023

Presentation outline

- General conservation plan basics
- Concepts for the desert tortoise general conservation plan
- Progress to date and next steps
- Questions and discussion



What is a general conservation plan?

- Type of habitat conservation plan or HCP.
- Plan written by the Service to provide a framework to meet section 10(a)(1)(B) permit issuance criteria for an incidental take permit.
- Streamlines issuance of incidental take permits.
- Promotes regulatory certainty.
- Improves conservation outcomes.



Why a general conservation plan?

Streamlining	Provides a streamlined mechanism for applicants without a federal nexus to obtain Endangered Species Act authorization for covered activities.
Regulatory Certainty	Removes uncertainty from the planning process by providing specific guidance regarding minimization, mitigation, and monitoring to applicants during the permitting process.
Conservation	Improves conservation outcomes for the desert tortoise by identifying suitable areas for mitigation and translocation.

How do general conservation plans work?

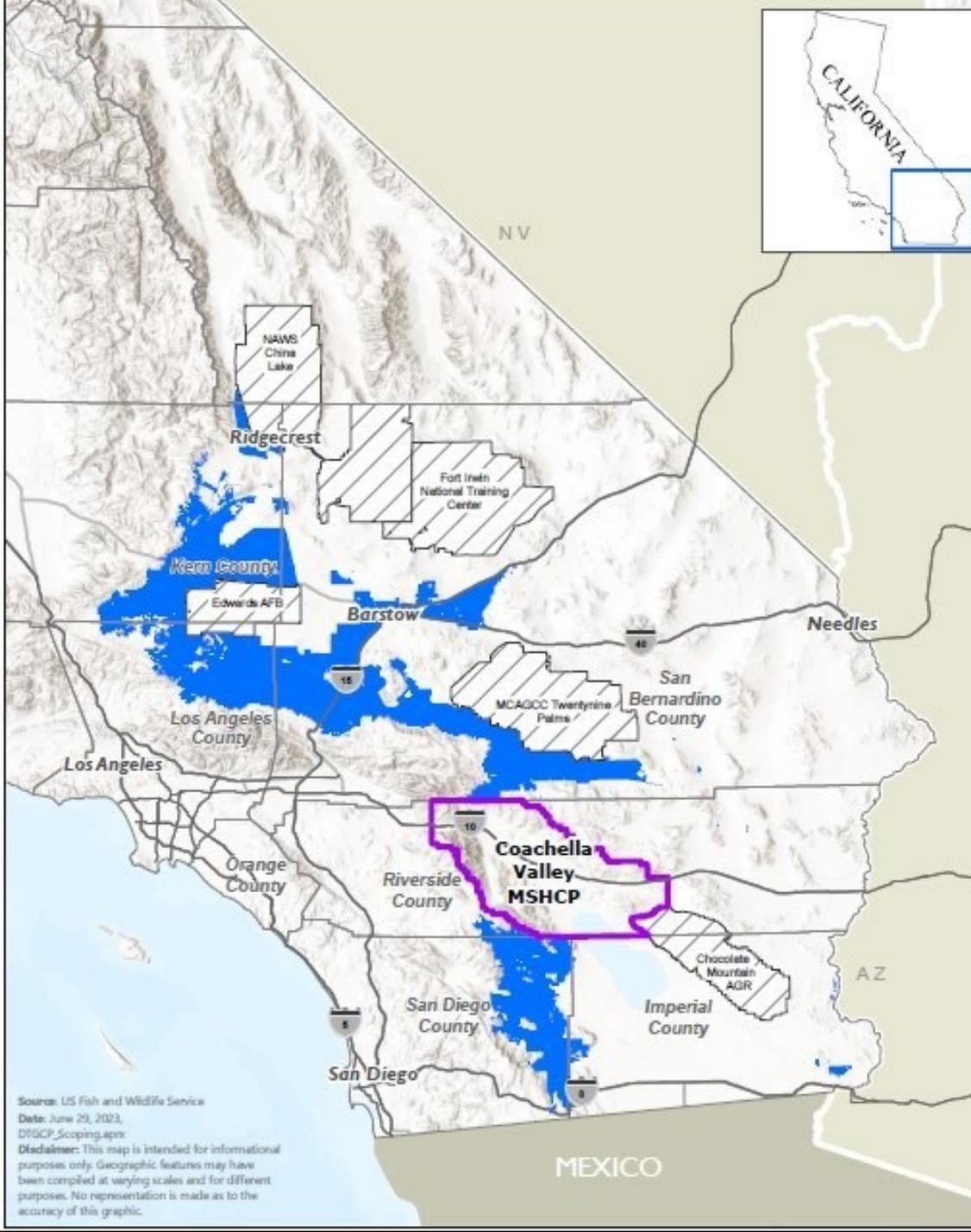
- The Plan describes how an applicant would need to minimize, mitigate, and monitor the effects of incidental take.
- The Service complies with NEPA, at the general conservation plan stage.
- If an applicant agrees to meet the Plan's requirements, the Service will issue a project-specific incidental take permit in an accelerated time frame



Basic concepts of the desert tortoise general conservation plan

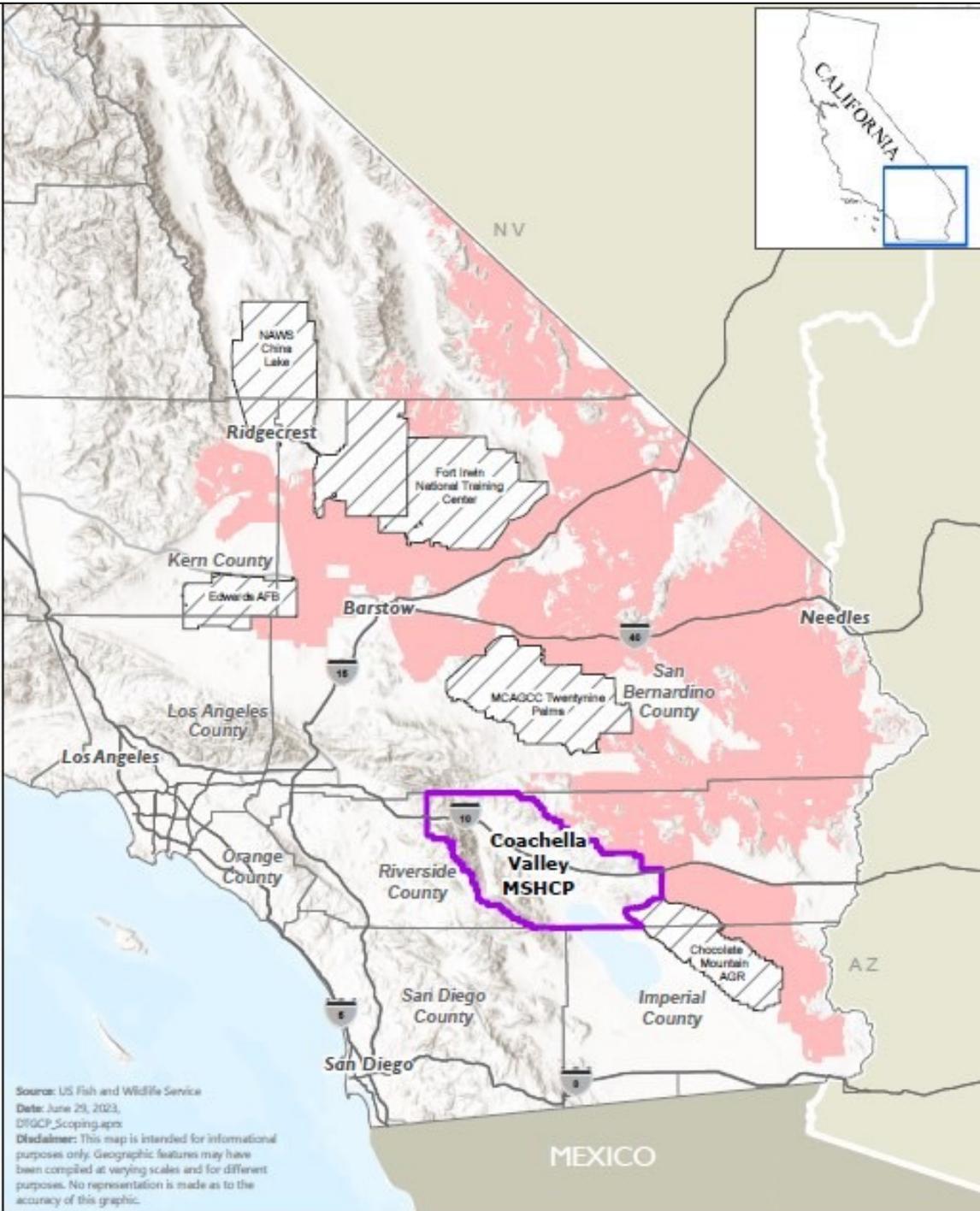
Activities that could be covered under the general conservation plan include the development, operation and maintenance of:

- ▶ Commercial (e.g., renewable energy)
- ▶ Agricultural
- ▶ Residential
- ▶ Industrial
- ▶ Infrastructure projects
- ▶ Non-federal Rights-of-ways



The Plan includes defined “permit areas” where applicants can apply for incidental take coverage.

- ▶ Non-federal lands outside of desert tortoise conservation areas.



The Plan includes defined “mitigation areas” where mitigation resulting from incidental take permits would occur.

- ▶ Critical Habitat
- ▶ Areas of Critical Environmental Concern
- ▶ California Desert National Conservation Lands
- ▶ Other areas managed for their conservation values

Progress to date

- Pre-scoping in summer 2022.
- Published Notice of Intent in July 2023 with a 45-day public comment period.
 - 15 comment submissions from various public and private groups.
- Public scoping meetings in July/August 2023.
- Tribal outreach to 31 tribes in July 2023.

We Are Here



Notice of Intent

Scoping Process

**Draft Environmental
Impact Statement**

Public Review

**Final Environmental
Impact Statement**

Record of Decision

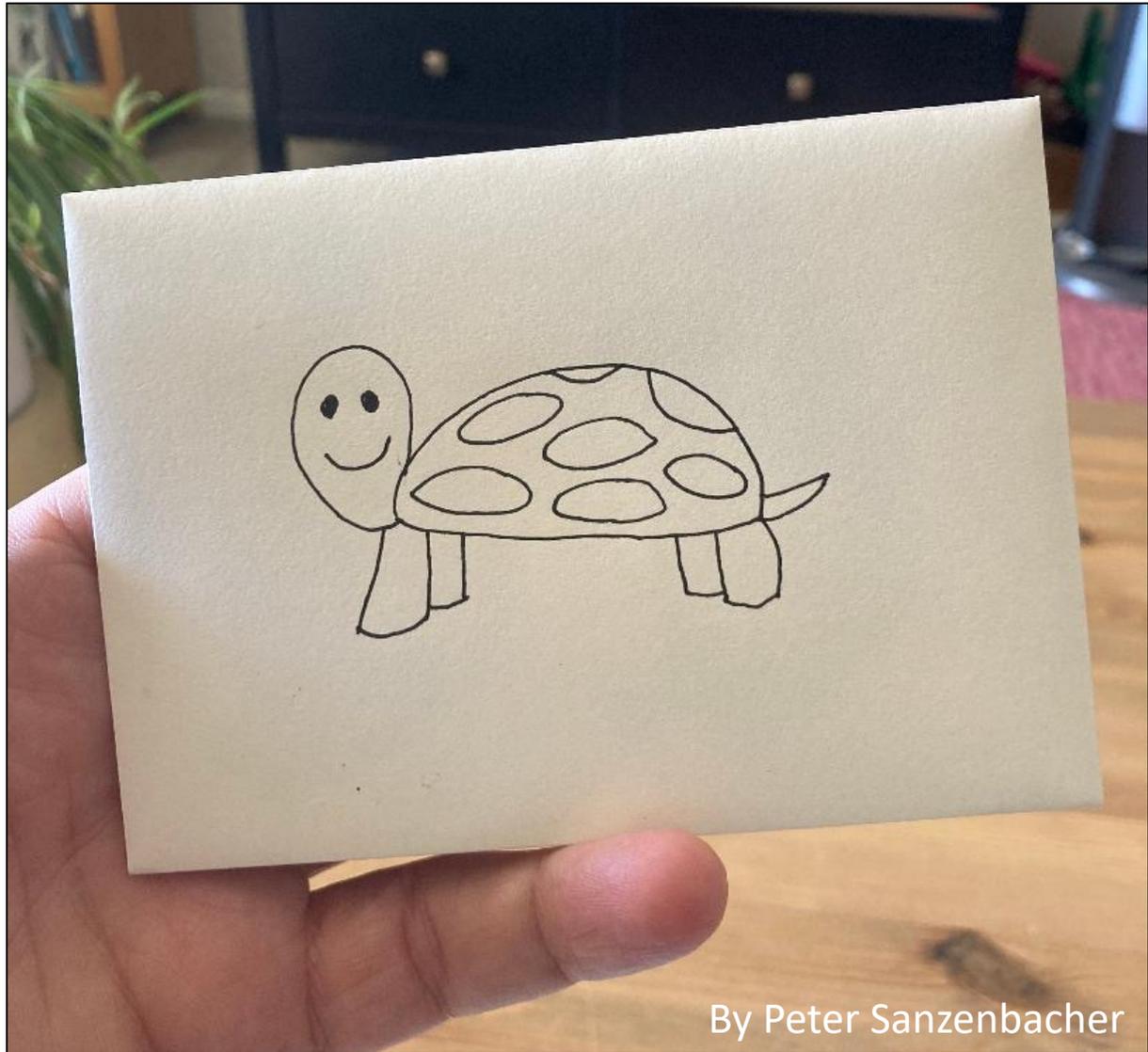
Ongoing work...



- Bi-weekly meetings with the Service, BLM, and NEPA consultant (EMPSi) on the EIS.
- Monthly coordination meetings with the Service and CDFW managers to discuss the General Conservation Plan and tortoise conservation.
- Early chapters of the EIS drafted and under review.
 - Refining alternatives for analysis.
- Continuing to refine the General Conservation Plan based on public comments and internal reviews.

Long-term schedule is to publish the Notice of Availability in October 2024 and finalize the Record of Decision in January 2025.

Questions?



By Peter Sanzenbacher