United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
California/Nevada Operations Office
2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2606
Sacramento, California 95825-0509

November 3, 2004

Dear Management Oversight Group Member:

Subject: Strategy for Implementing Desert Tortoise Recovery Actions

The purpose of this letter is to solicit your input and participation in a rangewide desert tortoise recovery implementation strategy. The overriding goal of this strategy is to significantly increase the implementation of on-the-ground recovery actions during the next five years in all four states. Our primary objective is to identify actions that the agencies and stakeholders can support, and move expeditiously to carry them out.

Background

In December of 2002, the General Accounting Office (GAO) completed an audit of recovery actions undertaken since the listing of the desert tortoise. They prepared a report entitled "Endangered Species: Research Strategy and Long-term Monitoring Needed for the Mojave Desert Tortoise Recovery Program." The primary recommendation of this report was to "develop and implement a coordinated research strategy that would link land management decisions with research results." The report also addressed the need to have a program or strategy that consolidates scientific information and on-going research with land management decisions to insure that the efforts are coordinated, are not being duplicated, and provide opportunity for adaptive management. In addition, the GAO report recommended that the Secretaries of the Interior and Defense and other agencies identify and secure continued funding of rangewide population monitoring through development of Memoranda of Agreement.

Likewise, the Service has received direction from the U.S. Congress and the Department of the Interior to move aggressively to implement tortoise recovery actions and to conduct research and monitoring that evaluate the effectiveness of recovery actions.

Creation of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Desert Tortoise Recovery Office

To accomplish these recommendations, the Service is establishing a Desert Tortoise Recovery Office (DTRO). This office will not be an "office" in the traditional sense. It will be led by a desert tortoise recovery coordinator, located in Reno, who will supervise two or three "local coordinators." These local coordinators will be located in various Service field offices (or with other cooperating entities) throughout the range that coincide as much as possible with State geographic boundaries.

This office and its staff will not have regulatory responsibilities (e.g., section 7 consultation, habitat conservation plans, etc.). Instead, it will focus exclusively on research, monitoring, and recovery action implementation and associated section 10(a)(1)(A) permitting (i.e., recovery permits). The primary responsibility of the DTRO will be to provide the staff support to land and resource management agencies and stakeholders to implement desert tortoise recovery actions rangewide. The local coordinator will be responsible for ensuring monitoring and research data and reports are incorporated into the centralized data base maintained by the DTRO.

Desert Tortoise Science Advisory Team

An important component of the DTRO will be the creation of a Desert Tortoise Science Advisory Team (SAC) that will be established to provide high quality current scientific information and advice on rangewide issues related to desert tortoise recovery. The SAC will be comprised of experts in the field of ecology, chelonian conservation and other fields of biology to assist the DTRO and land managers to improve the linkage between research activities/results with land management actions/decisions. The expertise and services of the SAC will be available to advise the DTRO, MOG, DMG and the various Recovery Implementation Work Groups.

Recovery Implementation Work Groups

An important immediate function of the DTRO will be to work within established recovery planning/implementation efforts, such as the Clark County, Nevada Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan and Washington County and the Utah Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan, to develop a desert tortoise recovery action plan for those States or geographic area for the next 5 years.

The Desert Managers Group (DMG) is proposing to establish a Desert Tortoise Planning and Implementation Work Group (DTPIWG) comprised of members of the DMG and a USGS representative from the Science Advisory Team to develop recovery action plans for the Western Mojave, Eastern Colorado, Northern Colorado, and Eastern Mojave recovery units. The DTRO staff will participate in and provide staff support to the DTPIWG planning effort and help secure funds and implement the action plans. The DTRO staff and DTPIWG will solicit input from local stakeholders and encourage their assistance in implementation of high priority recovery actions.

The primary goal of each of the groups is, with the assistance of the DTRO staff, to prioritize recovery activities that are immediately implementable and have broad support. The DTRO will support the groups in implementing these activities, while working to resolve disagreements and build consensus among stakeholders, agencies, and researchers.

We all share many areas of agreement on tortoise recovery. Therefore, we should focus our collective energy and resources on immediately implementing widely supported high priority actions.

Recovery Action Plans and Recovery Plan Revision

The recovery action plans described above will be short documents (5 - 10 pages) that list and prioritize desert tortoise recovery actions within a specific portion of the range to be carried out in the next 5 years. The action plans will also identify the research and monitoring needed for each action to achieve the GAO goal of linking recovery with management actions. Our goal is to complete recovery action planning by June 2005.

As part of our response to the GAO audit findings, we also initiated an independent assessment of the 1994 recovery plan for the desert tortoise. This assessment was completed by the Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan Assessment Committee (DTRPAC). The final DTRPAC draft assessment report was recently mailed out for review. The purpose of this report is to provide scientific guidance to the Service on updating and improving the recovery plan.

Ultimately, the Service will use the assessment report and the recovery action plans as a basis to finalize a revised recovery plan consistent with the direction provided by the GAO audit, the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and Congress. Amending the recovery plan in this manner will enhance overall support for various activities and increase the likelihood that projects will be funded.

Coordination with Ongoing Efforts

The purpose of the DTRO is not to duplicate or supplant any other ongoing desert tortoise conservation efforts. Rather, the office will serve and advise the Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG), the DMG in California, and other organizational entities with an interest in desert tortoise recovery. The DTRO staff will work closely with the MOG to provide recommendations on range-wide recovery action priorities, to track recovery accomplishment, and to identify resource needs. As described above, the DTRO will also work closely with the DMG to assist in prioritizing and carrying out recovery actions, report accomplishments, and make recommendations based on research where land management actions are needed. Likewise, the DTRO will assist the Department of Defense agencies, the Bureau of Land Management, State agencies, and other entities.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by acknowledging the incredible work that has been done to date by many of you involved in desert tortoise conservation. The purpose of this DTRO initiative is to build on and support this work, not to replace or compete with it. The DMG, DTRPAC, MOG,

USGS, various academic researchers, Department of Defense, Federal and State agencies, conservation organizations, and other stakeholders are all making enormous contributions to tortoise recovery. We believe our approach here will lead to a process that expands collaborative relationships between stakeholders and reduces conflict, thus benefiting the desert tortoise. We intend to discuss this strategy at the December 9 MOG meeting in Henderson, Nevada. We encourage you to attend this important meeting to provide us your thoughts and ideas on the process we've outlined. I greatly appreciate your support and involvement in our efforts to recovery the desert tortoise.

Sincerely,

Steve Thompson
Manager, California/Nevada Operations