

# **Proposed Desert Tortoise Recovery Actions**

## **Recommendation of the DMG Desert Tortoise Ad Hoc Work Group August 22, 2002**

### **I. Charter and Schedule**

The Desert Managers Group, at the June 12-13 meeting, decided to increase emphasis on implementation of cooperative recovery actions for desert tortoise, and to become more assertive as a group in promoting recovery actions. This position was based largely on the composition of the DMG, which includes all the state and federal major land management implementation and wildlife regulatory organizations in the California Desert, a region that includes 75 percent of the tortoise's range.

Building on work done at the DMG meeting, an Ad Hoc Group was created to develop a proposal representing the entire DMG for the purpose of obtaining support from the Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG) in September. The following schedule of actions was established to coordinate efforts and allow for review by all DMG members:

1. Initiate immediately, a process to compile actions taken by member agencies toward recovery of the Desert Tortoise since listing (completed).
2. Feed that information to the Desert Tortoise Coordinator for use in the MOG TAC coordination meeting on July 17 (completed).
3. Convene the Ad Hoc Work Group at Joshua Tree National Park on July 30 to draft a DMG strategy/proposal with review of the actions taken to date, and input from the MOG TAC meeting (completed).
4. Prepare the final draft of the written strategy/proposal to allow for advance review by all DMG member agencies prior to the September 11-12 DMG meeting in 29 Palms (completed).
5. Refine the strategy/proposal and agree on priority work areas at the September 11-12 DMG meeting.
6. Present the strategy/proposal to the September 19 meeting of the MOG in Las Vegas to gain MOG support of the DMG proposal.

### **II. Proposal**

We would like to focus efforts in FY 2003 and FY 2004, through each of our agency's budget processes, on four priorities: evaluation of actions taken, population monitoring, completion of land use plans, and increased focus on the causes of mortality. A brief rationale and a set of areas for action are provided under each heading.

#### **A. Evaluate Management Actions**

***Rationale:** The management situation in the California Desert has changed since listing of the desert tortoise in 1990. Numerous actions have been taken in support of tortoise recovery based on the recovery plan without a process or mechanism for review or evaluation of their effectiveness. Such a process would be useful to provide range-wide data on what is being done, a validation assessment of actions taken, and identification of needs for further study.*

1. Complete a compilation of data on actions taken and create a database, accessible to all DMG agencies.
2. Manage, update, and maintain the database.
3. Establish a process to evaluate the effectiveness of recovery actions taken to date emphasizing those areas where the most management change has occurred since listing. The initial assessments would focus on grazing, vehicle management, and fencing actions. The evaluation would include a summary of the actions implemented and an assessment based on current literature and reports of their effectiveness in terms of population or habitat changes. The evaluation would consider the effects and uncertainties related to uncontrollable mortality factors affecting tortoise populations and habitat such as weather and disease. The assessment would provide recommendations for further studies to evaluate the effectiveness of actions taken or proposed. Processes and assessment products would be subject to peer review.
4. Design long term (15 years or longer) adaptive management or monitoring studies with emphasis on areas where management action is being taken or has been taken. Studies should be peer reviewed and stakeholder participation should be invited. Peer review participation would be based on scientific credentials.

#### **B. Continue Desert Tortoise Population Monitoring:**

***Rationale:** It is essential to sustain efforts to better describe population numbers and trends in order to support informed decision-making. To do so in a statistically defensible fashion requires multiple years of consistent data collected across the range, allowing for much better comparability and analysis. Statistically supportable population density estimates derived through Line Distance Sampling (LDS) will allow the effectiveness of management actions to be assessed and to delist by Recovery Unit. Monitoring tortoise populations at a landscape level using LDS is generally accepted and was endorsed by the MOG. However, information from long term Permanent Study Plots, the basis for most current population*

*trend estimates, has provided valuable information related to mortality, habitat conditions, disease, and population trends.*

1. Strive to complete LDS in each of the 5 Recovery Units within California using a minimum total number of 3824 kilometers in the sampling effort, a 20 percent increase from FY 01 (148 km on the Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Center, are located outside critical habitat). The number of kilometers is based upon the 2001 LDS effort using the encounter rates observed within each Desert Wildlife Management Area/Recovery Unit. Regional level managers should be involved in establishing the funding priority for this activity.
2. If funding for LDS is limited, a rotation of DWMA's and/or Recovery Units would be developed to ensure that at least some areas will be sampled adequately to establish scientifically supportable baseline density estimates.
3. Determine the level of LDS to be initiated in the next field season by January 15 in order to enable the contracting, training, permitting, and mobilization of field sampling crews by Mid-March.
4. It has been suggested that a group of biostatisticians without ties to the desert tortoise community should be convened to evaluate the merits of continuing to collect study plot data and identify a core number of Permanent Study Plots needed to complement LDS. Agreement on continuing to fund all Permanent Study Plots was not resolved by the Ad Hoc Work Group. Several Ad Hoc Work Group participants believe it is beneficial to do both study plots and LDS. The Ad Hoc Group did agree that a prioritization of continuing Permanent Study Plot studies, for funding purposes, is necessary.
5. Agencies are encouraged to use the current contracting arrangement with GSA which allows funds to be obligated in one FY and used in subsequent FY's.

### **C. Finish and Implement Land Use Plans**

***Rationale:** Land use planning processes have been ongoing for many years with considerable analysis and public participation. Funding and personnel are limited and need to be shifted toward implementation action.*

1. Emphasize completion of land use plans on schedule and shift funding and staff toward increased levels of implementation action. (This also may help resolve diversion of resources into some current lawsuit activities for some jurisdictions.)
2. Pilot a land use plan consistency analysis with University of Redlands for the West Mojave area. The analysis would be a factual assessment of the existing and proposed land use planning actions and decisions (including Habitat Conservation Plans) of the multiple agencies and local jurisdictions in the planning area as they relate to desert tortoise.

3. Conduct a facilitated session with the management agencies and jurisdictions to assess opportunities to improve consistency and coordination in implementation based on the plan consistency analysis.
4. Conduct annual reviews within the DMG of recovery action priorities for use in agency budgeting processes.

#### **D. Increase Focus on Causes for Mortality**

***Rationale:** The initial focus of the desert tortoise recovery effort necessarily involved improving population data and taking some level of conservation action based on available information used to develop the recovery plan. However, causes for population decline still are not well understood. Additional action is needed to address mortality. The intent is to improve over time the understanding and reduce of causal factors in mortality.*

1. Convene 5 meetings, by recovery unit, of credentialed scientists and agency biologists familiar with each of the recovery units to rank the primary threats with a rationale. Ranking would be based on the currently available information and management situation and use information being developed by University of Redlands and the USGS Threats Analysis (Borman 2002). The intent is to develop a working, regional focus for the recovery unit that can be used to develop future proposed actions.
2. Hold a Disease Workshop with researchers, working biologists and managers to develop a proposed action plan to address disease. The products should also include a description of the role disease is playing in tortoise decline relative to other causes of mortality.
3. After the Disease Workshop, hold a similar workshop on predation (e.g., ravens and feral dogs).

### **III. Implementation Considerations**

Two primary implementation barriers have been identified: consistent funding from all participant agencies and stakeholder understanding and support. The proposed actions to address these follow.

1. Prepare a strategy for funding the proposal, identifying who needs to be engaged and how. Consistent with DMG agency budget cycles, describe project proposals and projected costs for future fiscal years in a manner that allows DMG agencies to incorporate them into normal budget processes, with information describing the DMG partnership effort and shared priority. In current fiscal years, the DMG would also discuss discretionary funding available to each member agency and the ability to apply it to the proposal. The DMG agencies will also explore outside partnerships and funding to supplement appropriated funding.
2. Prepare a public information and participation strategy. Deliberate efforts and mechanisms

are needed to ensure stakeholder understanding, participation and support. For example, the DMG website could include public information about actions taken, actions to be implemented, population status.

## **IV. Background**

### **A. Context**

Desert tortoise populations are showing signs of rapid and serious decline in much of their range, a serious concern for Desert Managers. Recovery and delisting of the desert tortoise are also the best long-term strategy for allowing continued uses of public and private lands, thereby avoiding conflicts under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The primary means of achieving desert tortoise recovery will be through the development and implementation of the agency land management plans that address both conservation and land uses in the California Desert.

In order to be effective, 1) planning and implementation of desert tortoise recovery actions and monitoring efforts must be coordinated and integrated among managers and scientists across jurisdictional boundaries, 2) desert tortoise recovery efforts need to be based on the best available science, 3) adequate funding and staff must be available to implement and coordinate DT recovery and monitoring actions, and 4) public, stakeholder, and congressional understanding and support must be established.

The DMG provides an efficient management structure for coordination and collaboration among the land and regulatory agencies in the interest of progress on implementing Desert Tortoise recovery actions.

### **B. Summary of Review of Actions since Listing**

The Line Distance sampling is in its second year of implementation. Consistent funding across all agencies is a major obstacle to maintaining a consistent population monitoring that will meet recovery plan recommendations. Plot samples still tend to be the basis for most current population trend estimates.

Considerable management effort has been applied to modify grazing and vehicle use within tortoise recovery units. Grazing no longer is a major land use within the range of the tortoise in California. Vehicle route systems have been or are being identified and modified to manage vehicle use and avoid potential adverse consequences in tortoise recovery units.

Minor amounts of tortoise fencing along roads have been completed, affecting relatively small areas. Due to expense, fencing seems to happen as part of projects when they are proposed. Similarly, signing of recovery units and management areas is uneven. Disease work shows localized problem areas, but causes are still poorly understood. Salvage protocols are implemented, allowing for information gathering. Work on predation has been limited and localized.

### **C. Summary of MOG/TAC Input**

The MOG/TAC review suggests that the Recovery Plan does not need to be revised. Rather, the focus should be on implementation of the current Plan. Threats have not changed since the Plan was written, however the threats vary by DWMA. In addition, not all threats are of equal importance due to their prevalence, the area affected, and other factors. The management situation/history also varies from one area to another. A Disease Workshop is planned for the November 14-16, 2002 at Zzyxx, CA to provide a focused discussion by researchers and synthesis of what is known, what is not known, and what is most important to find out. Additional threats workshops are under discussion.

### **V. Ad Hoc Work Group Participants**

Jim Kenna, BLM, Chair  
Linda Hansen, BLM  
Ernie Quintana, NPS  
Phil Medica, FWS  
Ray Bransfield, FWS  
Carl Benz, FWS  
Becky Jones, Cal Fish and Game  
Rhys Evans, MCAGCC  
Roy Madden, MCAGCC  
John Hamill, DOI  
Clarence Everly, DOD