

Briefing Statement

Date: February 28, 2003

Title: Health and Disease with regards to Desert Tortoise Recovery in California

Issues: Tortoise populations in California are declining. Disease appears to be one of the factors causing this decline.

Background/Status:

1. **Diseases:** Upper Respiratory Tract Disease and shell diseases have been known from California tortoise populations since the mid 1980's. Herpesvirus infections have been reported California tortoises and have been associated with illness and mortality. Elevated levels of toxicants have been implicated as potential causes of diseases in desert tortoises.
2. **Recovery Plan:** Initiation and continuation of epidemiological studies of URDT and other diseases is called for in the plan.
3. **Desert Tortoise Health and Disease Workshop.** A total of three workshops have taken place dealing with tortoise health and disease. The first workshop was in 1989, the second in 1996 and the most recent was held this past November. Information presented was on the most recent research pertaining to tortoise diseases and possible factors that contribute to increase in disease symptoms.

Proposed Next Steps:

1. Produce a summary of the November 2002 workshop. Summary will include what we know about healthy desert tortoises and ill tortoises; Sections on the different disease about what we know, what we suspect, what we don't know and critical research for that specific disease. Included will be a list of management recommendation that pertain to decreasing the spread of disease, determining other possible causes of disease and restoring current populations.
2. Once summary is produced, make available to DMG, MOG and other interested parties via DMG website. Some hard copies will also be available.
3. Convene a working group, familiar with disease research literature, to categorize and prioritize recommendations proposed in the workshop summary. The group should also determine how to aid in funding priorities.
4. Obtain all pertinent information on desert tortoise disease in a central location for use for agency personal, stakeholders and other interested parties to use.

