

Briefing Statement

Date: June 9, 2003

Title: Protecting Desert Tortoises from Predation by Common Ravens

Issues: At least some common ravens prey heavily on desert tortoises. The number of desert tortoises seems to be declining, in at least some portions of the California desert.

Background/Status:

- 1. Biological Aspects:** Common ravens are effective predators of small desert tortoises; a single nesting pair can kill dozens of juvenile desert tortoises. The number of common ravens in the desert has increased substantially because human activities have increased the abundance of food, water, and nesting sites. Common ravens are also known to damage crops and livestock and may affect other wildlife populations in the desert (nesting birds, reptiles, and small mammals).
- 2. History:** In 1989, the Bureau of Land Management announced its intentions to control common ravens. The Bureau was sued and subsequently scaled back its proposed control program; up to 120 common ravens were killed at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area and the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. In 1993 and 1994, the Bureau and National Biological Survey killed 49 common ravens as part of an experimental program of targeting problem birds. No effort was made to monitor the effect that removal of these common ravens had on desert tortoise numbers.
- 3. Current Status:** Declines in local populations of desert tortoises have prompted agencies and interest groups to manage common ravens to benefit desert tortoises. To this end, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asked representatives from several federal and state agencies, and other interested parties to meet and discuss this issue.

At the initial meeting, USDA-Wildlife Services presented extensive information on its efforts to reduce problems caused by common ravens in Nevada. In summary, Wildlife Services uses avicides to reduce the number of common ravens at sites where they are causing problems, such as at landfills and feedlots. Before it treats an area, Wildlife Services establishes a target goal for the number of common ravens that it attempts to reach to eliminate the damage they are causing in a specific area. A key point made by Wildlife Services personnel is that the program is geared to eliminate specific damage, not to simply reduce the number of common ravens. Wildlife Services complies with the National Environmental Policy Act through an environmental assessment that discusses its program on a state-wide basis. To date, this program has

generated little controversy in Nevada. We are unsure how the treatment program applied at landfills and feedlots would affect the rate at which desert tortoises are being preyed on by common ravens.

4. Options for Management of Common Ravens in California

Option 1 - Desert Wide Raven Control Program:

Target specific problem common ravens throughout the California desert; target aggregations of common ravens anywhere in the California desert that are posing problems to health, safety, and property at the request of the harmed party; undertake a public education program to get the public to avoid actions that provide subsidies to common ravens and manage habitat to reduce opportunities for common ravens (landfill cover, design of power and telephone poles, etc.).

And

a. Prepare a 'NEPA scoping document' and hold public scoping meetings to assess issues and concerns

OR

b. Prepare an environmental assessment to comply with NEPA

OR

c. Prepare an environmental impact statement to comply with NEPA.

Note: If we take this approach, we need to clearly define our problems and goals for each type of action (i.e., the connection between desert tortoises and treating common ravens in a city).

Option 2 - Targeted Control Program for Common Ravens

Target specific problem common ravens throughout the California desert and prepare an environmental assessment to comply with NEPA.

And

Conduct a Nevada-type approach to specific issues caused by common ravens in California (which would be done at the request of the entity with the problem), using a separate NEPA process

And

Use public education and best management practices during implementation of projects to restore habitat options for common ravens. (No NEPA compliance specific to common ravens needed.)

And

Conduct research to determine if individuals within the large aggregations of common ravens are moving from subsidized areas into the desert and killing desert tortoises or altering ecosystems. (No NEPA compliance needed.)

And

Retrofit facilities to reduce their utility to common ravens; separate NEPA compliance may be necessary.

The major differences between these approaches is that all the actions in option 1 would be covered under one NEPA document; in option 2, the different actions would proceed along parallel but separate courses. The main advantage with option 2 is that we can move ahead on different fronts without being slowed by missing information on one aspect of the overall program.

Issues and Proposed Next Steps:

1. A key issue involves determining which type of NEPA document should be prepared.
2. A second key issue involves finding staff and funding to implement whatever program is deemed appropriate. Wildlife Services has indicated that it could be lead agency and prepare the NEPA document under contract to the DMG or the lead DMG agency
3. A third issue involves continued Fish and Wildlife Service staff time to lead the project.
4. A second meeting of the group is scheduled for June 25. We will continue to evaluate courses of action; a prime point of discussion is the extent of an initial program to reduce the level of predation by common ravens on desert tortoises.

Contact:

Ray Bransfield, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - 805 644-1766