



Proposed Desert Tortoise Recovery Actions September 11, 2002

I. Introduction

Desert tortoise populations are showing signs of rapid and significant decline throughout in much of their range. The Desert Managers Group (DMG), an organization that includes all the major state and federal land management and wildlife regulatory agencies in the California Desert, encompasses a region that includes 75 percent of the range of the Mojave population of the desert tortoise. The following proposal reflects the DMG's desire to provide more leadership and increased emphasis on implementation of cooperative recovery actions for desert tortoise. The proposal was approved by the DMG on September 11, 2002.

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The DMG recognizes that many elements of this proposal have application to desert tortoise recovery efforts outside California. The DMG will coordinate its activities with the Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (MOG), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others to promote a consistent range-wide approach to recovery of the desert tortoise.

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II. Proposed Recovery Actions

The DMG will focus efforts in FY 2003 and FY 2004, through each agency's budget processes, on four priorities:

1. Evaluating the effectiveness of past management actions,
2. Monitoring desert tortoise populations,
3. Finalizing agency land management plans, and
4. Increasing focus on the causes of mortality.

A brief rationale and action items 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. A database will be created summarizing recovery actions that have been completed since the desert tortoise was listed. The database will be updated as recovery actions are implemented. A summary report will be produced annually.

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2. The effectiveness of the major recovery actions taken since the tortoise was listed will be evaluated. The initial assessments will focus on grazing, vehicle management, and fencing actions. The evaluation will be based on current literature and reports, and summarize the actions that have been implemented and assess their effectiveness in terms of population or habitat changes. The evaluation will consider the effects and uncertainties related to other mortality factors affecting tortoise populations and habitat (e.g., weather, predation, disease). The assessment will provide recommendations for further studies or actions necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of actions taken or proposed. Processes and assessment products will be peer reviewed.

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3. Long term (15 years or longer) adaptive management or monitoring studies will be implemented in areas where management action is being taken or has been taken. Studies will be peer reviewed and stakeholder participation will be invited. Peer review participation will be based on scientific credentials.

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B. Continue Desert Tortoise Population Monitoring:

Rationale: It is essential for informed decision-making to sustain efforts to monitor population numbers and trends. To do so in a statistically defensible fashion requires multiple years of consistent data collected across the entire range of the desert tortoise. Statistically supportable population density estimates derived through Line Distance Sampling (LDS) will allow the effectiveness of management actions to be assessed and provide a basis for delisting by Recovery Unit. Monitoring tortoise populations at a landscape level using LDS is generally accepted and was endorsed by the MOG. In addition, data from long term Permanent Study Plots (PSP), which are the basis for most current population trend estimates, has provided valuable information related to mortality, habitat conditions, disease, and population trends.

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1. Land managers will strive to complete a minimum of 3,824 kilometers of LDS in the 5 Recovery Units within California (148 km are located outside critical habitat). This number of kilometers is based upon the 2001 LDS effort using the encounter rates observed within each Desert Wildlife Management Area/Recovery Unit. Regional managers will be involved in establishing the funding priority for this activity.

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2. FWS and the Redlands Institute will summarize/evaluate the types of data that have been collected at the Permanent Study Plots (PSP) in the California deserts. An ad hoc group of managers, field biologists, and bio-statisticians will identify and evaluate how LDS and PSP can be effectively integrated to be cost effective and produce the best data and to establish the relative priority for funding PSPs and LDS. These tasks will be completed prior to the FY 03 monitoring season.

3. The level of LDS and PSP monitoring to be initiated in the next field season will be determined by January 15th of each year in order to enable the contracting, training, permitting, and mobilization of field sampling crews by Mid-March.
4. If funding is limited, a rotation of DWMA's and/or Recovery Units will be developed to ensure that at least some areas are sampled adequately to establish scientifically supportable baseline density estimates.
5. Agencies will utilize the existing contract with GSA or other arrangements which allow monitoring funds to be obligated in one FY and used in subsequent FY's.

C. Finalize and Implement Land Management Plans

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

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1. BLM will strive to complete its land management plans on schedule and shift funding and staff toward increased levels of implementation.
2. The Redlands Institute will assist the DMG to evaluate desert tortoise recovery actions included in DOD, NPS, and BLM land management plans in the West Mojave Recovery Unit to determine where collaboration and cooperation will improve effectiveness. Note: the West Mojave plan evaluation will be a pilot for an approach that will be applied to all recovery units in the California desert.
3. Based on the results of C.2, above, the DMG will host a facilitated session with the management jurisdictions in the West Mojave Recovery Unit to develop recommendations for consolidating and integrating recovery efforts among agencies.
4. Under the auspices of the DMG, recovery action priorities will be reviewed annually for use in agency budgeting processes.

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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 or documented. Additional action is needed to address mortality. The intent is to improve, over time, the understanding of and reduce the causal factors of mortality.*

1. The DMG will host a meeting(s) of credentialed scientists and agency biologists to rank the primary threats to the desert tortoise in each recovery unit. The ranking will be based on the currently available information and management situation and use information being developed by University of Redlands and the USGS Threats Analysis (Boarman 2002). The

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rationale for ranking will be documented. The intent is to develop a working, regional focus to guide adaptive management efforts in each recovery unit.

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2. The California Department of Fish and Game, the USFWS, and the Redlands Institute will host a Disease Workshop with researchers, field biologists and managers to develop a proposed action plan to address disease. Products of the workshop will also include a description of the role disease is playing in tortoise decline relative to other causes of mortality.

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3. After the Disease Workshop, USFWS will sponsor a workshop to develop a work plan and budget to address the impacts of predation (e.g., ravens and feral dogs) on the desert tortoise. This work plan will focus on development of actions to be taken by all agencies to lessen the impacts of predation. USFWS will have overall lead for coordinating implementation of the work plan.

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III. Implementation Strategy

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Rationale: Success of the recovery effort will depend on the availability of sufficient resources to affect priority recovery and monitoring actions in a timely manner. Agency funding is not adequate to implement an effective, coordinated recovery effort for the desert tortoise.

The DMG's implementation strategy is focused on: (1) developing consistent funding from all participant agencies, (2) fostering stakeholder understanding, participation, and support; and (3) pursuing partnerships and non traditional funding sources. Specific elements of this strategy include:

1. DMG partner will use discretionary funding and staff resources to implement the proposal, as feasible.
2. Where additional funds/resources are needed, DMG agency will develop funding requests to implement priority recovery, monitoring or research actions. Examples of current funding needs includes:
 - a. Population monitoring (LDS and PSP monitoring) – (BLM).
 - b. An evaluation of the effectiveness of past recovery actions (e.g., grazing, vehicle management, etc.) (BLM)
 - c. Design and implementation of adaptive management studies to assess the effectiveness of recovery actions (USGS, BLM, NPS)
 - d. Implementation of a raven management program (FWS, BLM, DOD, NPS)
 - e. Implementation of other identified priority recovery actions (e.g., fencing, head starting, relocation, land acquisition).

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Funding requests will be incorporated into appropriate agency budget requests. The DMG will enlist the active support of the DMG Regional Executives and the Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group to champion the funding requests.

3. The DMG will build a constituency for desert tortoise recovery implementation among interested stakeholders (environmental groups, OHV groups, etc) and political entities (local governments, congress, advisory committees, etc). A public information and participation strategy will be prepared in coordination with the DMG Desert Information Resource Team (DIRT). The DMG website will be expanded to include public information about actions taken, actions to be implemented, and population status. Stakeholders will be invited to partner with the DMG in the implementation of recovery actions, as appropriate. The DMG executives are planning to host a Desert Tortoise Summit in the spring of 2003 to build support and promote a collaborative approach for desert tortoise recovery efforts among government, stakeholders, and business.

4. The DMG will pursue partnerships and non governmental funding to supplement appropriated funding. For example, the DMG is currently working with the University of Redlands Desert Tortoise Project and the Department of Defense's Mojave Desert Ecosystem Program to implement several DMG proposed desert tortoise actions. In addition, the DMG is working with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to establish a California Desert Fund to encourage corporate funding of DMG initiatives. The DMG will continue to explore other potential non-traditional funding strategies and/or sources as opportunities arise.

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