

HABITAT CONSERVATION TECHNICAL COMMITTEE
for the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)

A regular meeting of the Habitat Conservation Technical Committee (TC) was held in the conference room of the Washington County Administration Building, **June 20, 2013.**

Members present were:

Ann McLuckie, Chairman	Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR)
Nathan Brown, Vice Chairman	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Tim Croissant	Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Cameron Rognan	Wash Co. Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)
Kristen Comella	Snow Canyon State Park (SCSP)

Absent and excused:

Gary McKell	Local Biologist
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Also present were:

Bob Sandberg	Washington County HCP Administrator
Amber Stocks	Washington County HCP Recorder
Jodi Borgeson	Washington County Attorney's Office

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Ann McLuckie noted a quorum existed and called the meeting to order at 1:08 PM.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. May 9, 2013

Page 2, paragraph 4, sentence 1: deleted,

“ARS filled out an application with the DWR on this well-thought-out project.”

Page 3, paragraph 1, sentence 1: changed,

From: “Cameron Rognan ~~pointed out~~ that last year there were plantings done on DWR property and ~~not a single plant survived.~~”

To: “Cameron Rognan stated that last year there were plantings done on DWR property and he did not observe a single plant surviving.”

Page 5, paragraph 5, sentence 2: changed,

From: “There are tortoises that have been at the TCF for ten years in the positive pen and ~~are still healthy animals.~~”

To: “There are tortoises that have been at the TCF for ten years in the positive pen and have no clinical signs of URTD.”

Page 5, paragraph 6, sentence 2: changed,

From: “Chairman McLuckie pointed out that over 8% of tortoises throughout the Reserve have clinical signs of URTD such as ~~bromus up the nose~~, snotty nose, etc...”

To: “Chairman McLuckie pointed out that in some years over 8% of tortoises throughout the Reserve have clinical signs of URTD such as snotty nose, etc... Clinical signs could be confounded by other things such as bromus in the nares.”

MOTION by Nathan Brown to approve the amended minutes and table approval of the work meeting minutes.

Seconded by Kristen Comella.

Discussion: None.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

3. **GENERAL BUSINESS**

a. **Draft HCP Budget 2014**

Bob Sandberg showed exhibit 3-a-1, a draft 2014 budget. The contingency amounts are for things that need to be addressed above and beyond what is needed to keep the HCP functioning. Contingency amounts are available to use for special projects that come up without having to re-open the budget.

Nathan Brown suggested that the budget should include up to \$4,000 to help fund the Division of Wildlife Resources’ tortoise adoption program. During the first year a tortoise is adopted, the Division wants to offer vet care for sick tortoises. The TC talked about the need to get adoptive ready tortoises out of the temporary care facility as soon as feasible.

The *other species* budget account benefits species that are threatened or endangered such as the southwest willow flycatcher and Virgin River fish. It may also be used for projects at Confluence Park that can help other species. There may be opportunities in 2014 to pull from the contingency amount for appraisals, title searches, a water line, etc. Wildlife rehabilitation also helps to benefit other species such as raptors.

The committee discussed fire prevention prospects. There are two line items dealing with this: *fire restoration and rehabilitation* and *road seeding*. The road seeding account allows for potential herbicide and/or seed application to help prevent fires from occurring or spreading.

MOTION by Cameron Rognan to table the discussion.

Seconded by Tim Croissant.

Discussion: None.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

Exhibit 3-a-2 shows the ARS proposal, itinerary and report for the rest of 2013-2014.

b. Fuel Reduction on Cottonwood Road

Chairman McLuckie felt it would be good to consider if the goats along Cottonwood Road are satisfying our needs. She shared her observations:

- Money has been spent to remove fire fuel from the roadway and now there is a lot of tumbleweed (Russian thistle) buildup next to the fence from previous years. Are there additional options to use other than goats?
- To reduce stress to pregnant goats, the females are allowed to leave the herd when giving birth. Sometimes the mother will abandon her babies then opportunistic ravens could attack them. The DWR found an abandoned kid and returned it to the herd. Are the goats adding to raven problems?
- The DWR found a dead goat and have observed goats wandering out of the right-of-way. Lastly, the goat herder left a goat behind when he finished up.

Kristen Comella felt that Chairman McLuckie's observations should be logged. She didn't feel the goat project should be abandoned, but that the contract needs to be tightened up.

Chairman McLuckie wanted to know what can be sprayed along the road to prevent growth as there has been an explosion of tumbleweed and native vegetation is being choked out. Tim Croissant asked what value the vegetation has within the road corridor as there are options to remove it all. Not very many chemicals will kill one species of broadleaf plant without killing all other broadleaf as well.

Bob Sandberg felt there have been other things that may have contributed to an increase of tumbleweed in addition to the goats. The ground was stirred up last year when the BLM had a new fence put in and there has been a huge crop of tumbleweed on both sides of the fence, especially in the burned areas, and then tumbleweed blows against the fence and piles up. It would be good to find a long-term solution to reduce fire potentials along the roadway and it is good to have a place that can stop fire from spreading further. Continuing these efforts are important and it may also be good to put seeds in front of the goats next year.

Tim Croissant stated it would be good to spray herbicide in one area and use goats in another to see what is most effective at getting rid of cheat grass. It might also show if goats are causing the increase of tumbleweed or not. Kristen Comella asked if controlled burns can be done this year to eliminate old tumbleweed fuel load along Cottonwood Road, Red Hills Parkway and SR-18. Cameron Rognan added that the

recently installed culverts along Red Hills Parkway are obstructed by dried tumbleweed. There needs to be some kind of program to get rid of tumbleweed both old and new growth. The committee talked about combining efforts and different options to get rid of tumbleweed. The TC needs to clearly identify what needs to be done in order to get ahead of the curve and determine what can be done this year.

TC members will look into successful methods of reducing tumbleweed along with costs. They will get an opinion from BLM specialists to assess whether tumbleweeds are reducing the effectiveness of Cottonwood Road as a fire corridor and pursue viable options of physically removing the tumbleweed. An environmental assessment needs to be completed to satisfy requirements of the national environmental policy act (NEPA) in some areas before firebreaks can be made. The cheat grass can be sprayed this fall along Cottonwood Road, Red Cliffs Recreation Area, and Babylon. Other vegetation can be sprayed next spring. If the herbicide works well, the same chemicals could be used elsewhere.

c. Gila Trail Completion

Kristen Comella explained that a portion of the Gila trail is located on the west side of the Ledges Development. Due to topography and lack of funding it was necessary to connect the Gila Trail with the existing paved trail on the west side of SR-18 near the north end of the Ledges Development. It then follows the paved trail for about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile until it reaches the Snow Canyon overlook dirt road, then it follows the dirt road to the canyon rim and continues to follow the rim to the park's north entrance. The Park originally wanted the trail to be along the rim but due to circumstances at the time, it was easier to follow an existing trail.

There has been a lot of interest from various users to move the three quarter mile section of trail along the rim for all users to enjoy the views of the canyon below. For a better recreation experience, Kristen asked if $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 mile section of the trail can be rerouted off the paved trail along SR-18 and placed near the rim. The TC previously looked at the Gila trail when it was first proposed and now feels comfortable allowing SCSP to reroute the trail. It is close to 4,000 feet in elevation with black brush habitat and low tortoise densities.

MOTION by Nathan Brown to reroute the Gila trail using adaptive management.
Seconded by Tim Croissant.
Discussion: None.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

d. HCP Review and Renewal

The HCAC members are reviewing the draft HCP review and will submit comments to fine tune the draft. The HCP review will help with the renewal process.

e. Translocation Webinar Update

Chairman McLuckie reported there was a recent translocation webinar from the USFWS and USGS. It was presented that when wild tortoises are moved less than 175 kilometers (109 miles), they are genetically similar and the risks are low. This tells us there is potential to move animals from the Upper Virgin River recovery unit to the Beaver Dam Slope if the current translocation site in Zone 4 reaches maximum capacity. In the Upper Virgin Recovery Area, areas containing tortoise densities of 10.79 / km² or below would be considered “depleted” and would thus be acceptable as a translocation site.

Zone 4 is being monitored and the tortoises placed there have generally been translocated near Babylon road but there is also good tortoise habitat further away from the road. Once Zone 4 becomes full, other alternatives can be explored. Chairman McLuckie would like more information from the recovery office, geneticists and experts before translocating out of the recovery area. She felt it is counter-intuitive since the recovery units were identified as genetically, ecologically and morphologically distinct. To move from one recovery unit to another would be mixing those distinct tortoises.

A genetic assessment written by Murphy et al. says that genetics are essential to recovery efforts. Using tortoises within a well defined recovery unit or local geographic area is far more desirable than translocating tortoises between recovery units. If local adaptations exist then translocating tortoises may do more harm than good by introducing maladaptive genes into a lowly adaptive population.

Nathan Brown stated there were a suite of studies done with translocation and the only variable that seemed to matter was the year in which the tortoises were translocated. The success and survivorship hinged upon the amount of moisture received that year. When tortoises are released they lose some body mass but can gain that back if conditions are tolerable. A limiting factor for translocating is temperature. If the temperature is extreme and the tortoise doesn't identify a burrow then it can die.

Chairman McLuckie continued, spatial distribution of “Mycoplasma agassizzi” is present closer to urban areas and sick tortoises are generally clustered together with some urbanization factor. The webinar discussed a paradigm shift in diseased animals; while they are still collecting blood samples and testing for URTD, they are now using the overall health of the animal to determine whether it should be translocated.

Cameron mentioned the webinar also suggested releasing tortoises in washes, not flat areas. When placed in a wash the tortoise doesn't seem to wander as far. We have a high survivorship of tortoises here, some tortoises have been observed 12 years after translocation. It would behoove us to get a publication out with our data and stories for others to see how it is working since the ultimate goals are recovery of the species range-wide.

4. OTHER BUSINESS

a. Tumbleweed Growth

Kristen Comella shared her observations of tumbleweeds in areas where construction has taken place such as SR-18, Red Hills Parkway and the Tuacahn Detention Basin. Tumbleweed is not classified as a noxious weed in Washington County.

b. Layton Property

Two years ago the Layton property was cleared of tortoises and fenced in anticipation of construction which has not occurred. Kristen talked to Kent Byland about opening the property for recreation since there is not a connecting recreation corridor. Alan Layton feels his project may occur in the near future and doesn't want to open it up at this time. The UDWR recently conducted a transect in the area and saw fresh sign of tortoise scat near where the fence was down.

c. Southern Parkway

The BLM has been working on land exchanges and has received help from the HCP and UDWR staff conducting tortoise surveys on several different BLM properties. Most of the parcels contained no tortoises or sign, however, seven tortoises were found on the Long Valley parcel. Two of the observations were very close to the Southern Parkway and tortoises were found on both sides of where the Parkway will be. The biological opinion for the Southern Parkway allows for translocation of two tortoises. A tortoise fence will likely need to be put up and the area will need to be cleared.

d. Red Cliffs Recreation Area

Tim Croissant mentioned the Red Cliffs Recreation Area road will be closed this week for drilling. Tortoise awareness training will be done for all workers and Tim will monitor the area during the project.

5. NEXT MEETING DATES

a. July 18, 2013

6. ADJOURN

MOTION by Tim Croissant to adjourn the meeting.

Seconded: Nathan Brown.

Discussion: None.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:50 PM.
Minutes prepared by Amber Stocks.