

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, **July 3, 2014.**

Members present were:

Nathan Brown, Chairman	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Kristen Comella, Vice Chairman	Snow Canyon State Park (SCSP)
Ann McLuckie	Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR)
Cameron Rognan	Washington County HCP
Gary McKell	Local Biologist
Tim Croissant	Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Also present were:

Amber Stocks	Washington County HCP Recorder
Jodi Borgeson	Deputy County Attorney
LeAnn Skrzynski	Southern UT National Conservation Lands Friends

1. CALL TO ORDER

Vice Chair Kristen Comella noted a quorum existed and called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. June 12, 2014

Page 5, paragraph 1, sentence 1: changed,

From: “Ann McLuckie mentioned the DWR has over 4,000 tortoise posters which can be given away ~~to partners who can then distribute them~~ to the public.”

To: “Ann McLuckie mentioned the DWR has over 4,000 tortoise posters which can be given away for distribution to the public.”

MOTION by Gary McKell to approve the minutes as amended.
Seconded by Cameron Rognan.
Discussion: None.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

3. GENERAL BUSINESS

a. Update on the Ivins dike maintenance project

Vice Chair Kristen Comella reported that she, Nathan Brown and Cameron Rognan met on site with Ivins City, NRCS representatives and an engineering company to get a better feel for the dike maintenance project.

Chairman Nathan Brown arrived at 9:45 a.m.

Kristen continued, it has been more than 40 years since the basins have been cleared out. Ivins will need to bring in heavy equipment to excavate the material from the basins and haul it away. Exhibit 3-a-1 shows a map of the dikes that need to have silt removed. In addition, any time an animal burrows into a dike it has the potential to compromise the structure in a big flood event. The other intent of this project is to bring the dikes and the basins into compliance with the state's requirements and to make sure the structures are not compromised in any way. The options are to: 1) remove all vegetation and put cobble sandstone on all the slopes of the dikes; 2) remove the vegetation and put cobble sandstone in select areas to reduce or eliminate the potential for burrows; 3) don't do anything and coordinate with the county for annual assessments and clearances.

The TC agreed that the structures existed before the Reserve was created and were "grandfathered in". The heavy equipment that will be used will utilize one access point and there will be turnaround spots near each polygon. Cameron felt that Ivins should do all they can to prevent tumbleweeds from coming into the Reserve and they should remove any tumbleweeds that enter.

On a side note, Kristen mentioned that Ivins is moving forward with their mitigation to relocate the Reserve fence near the Red Mountain and add more property to the Reserve.

The TC agreed that if the project incurs disturbances beyond the existing structure and sediment basins then the MOG mitigation formula will need to be applied. So far it appears the project will not go outside the existing footprint. The TC talked about the project's restoration efforts and what shrubs should be planted. They felt there is opportunity to experiment with plantings. The next time the detention basins are cleared out may be 20 or more years away. Signs can be placed to educate the public. Tortoises will need to have the ability to move across the dikes.

b. Identify post-fire restoration projects for grant proposals

The TC reviewed The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) landscape conservation forecasting document from September 2011. They talked about the pervasive abundance of annual brome grasses which make the Reserve vulnerable to fire. Habitat islands and re-vegetation may be useful in a grant proposal. If nothing is done then the problems will continue to get worse and vulnerability will increase. Tim Croissant feels the BLM can create fuel breaks with herbicide. Ann McLuckie felt that since it's hard to predict where a fire will burn, it would be best to maintain the current fuel breaks on existing land

disturbances such as power lines and roads. Some TC members felt that fire breaks could be placed strategically throughout the Reserve.

Ann explained that for three years the DWR monitored some polygons which were unsuccessfully rehabilitated. Since tortoises are creatures of habit they remain in their territory, even if the area has nothing for them. The TC felt that islands need to be identified for rehabilitation. There is a concern for tortoises when areas are rehabbed with heavy equipment. Cameron Rognan volunteered to serve as a biological monitor and walk in front of trucks while watching out for tortoises. The TC discussed drill seeding, using containerized plants, spraying herbicide, green stripping, brown stripping, and many other ideas which may be used to get grant funding. They all agreed that establishing plants in the Mojave Desert is very difficult.

Since the Watershed Restoration Initiative grant funding is usually given to projects which show benefit to game species, the TC felt it would be good to include areas with washes where game species hang out. They talked about work that would be needed for fire control and habitat restoration and felt it's important to look for any grant opportunity.

The Reserve has many non-native species like cheat grass and Cameron felt it is imperative to look at alternatives e.g. Kochia that would be more controllable and less of a fire threat. Ann stressed that replacing one problem with another is not the answer. She added that any vegetation surrounded by cheat grass will burn. If we don't get rid of the cheat grass we'll still have a problem. The TC talked about the many researchers such as Oregon and BYU that could possibly experiment with rehabilitation in the Reserve.

Kristen suggested starting small with projects; to pick a linear feature such as a wash and have a multi-pronged approach to remove all non-natives and treat the cheat grass. The TC came up with the following projects which can be worked into a grant proposal:

1. Cheat grass control: identify polygons, 50-100 acre areas where cheat grass is a problem. Use several approaches to help the polygons such as fuel breaks, planting containerized shrubs, rake in seed, cultivars, chemical herbicide, etc. A UTV or aircraft would be needed to reach the cheat grass areas;
2. Identify strategic fire fuel breaks;
3. Pursue clearing salt cedar (*Tamarix* sp.) from washes.

MOTION by Ann McLuckie to form a sub-committee or have individuals pursue three ideas for grant proposals: 1) identify washes and remove non-natives such as salt cedar and cheat grass along the washes; 2) identify polygons 50-100 acres in size to remove cheat grass and experimental plantings (can be containerized shrubs or other); 3) identify strategic fuel breaks.

Seconded by Gary McKell.

Discussion: None.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

Ann will utilize the help from others to write a draft grant proposal and will bring it to the next TC meeting. When identifying polygons, Ann will assess contiguous habitat priority areas and will list partners who want to help.

c. Discussion on RIT project identification request from webinar

Ann McLuckie summarized the RIT webinar and reported that the FWS explained the process of the RIT, the timeline of the RIT and what to expect in the future. There will be a MOG meeting and a RIT Winter Call this fall. RIT members will reconcile their dissenting opinions on the document that was emailed to each RIT member. There will be an interactive tracking tool available to track all recovery actions that have existed throughout all tortoise recovery units. For example, if someone wants to search for fencing, they can find all fencing efforts that have been made along with their effectiveness.

Each RIT member will complete a two page paper with two action proposals. The Upper Virgin Recovery Unit RIT will work collectively and will have a lot of proposals. Cameron mentioned he'll put together a proposal of what it would cost to put an education center next to the Desert Garden. Ann will add the items from agenda 3-b.

Chairman Brown felt it is important to monitor transects throughout the recovery unit to determine where tortoises occur in other locations besides the Reserve.

MOTION by Kristen Comella to schedule a RIT meeting, each member will bring a copy of the plan, look at the priorities, and then make assignments.
Seconded by Ann McLuckie
Discussion: The TC agreed to schedule the RIT meeting for August 14th, after the TC meeting.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

d. Review and possible action of SUU's human impact monitoring proposal

Cameron Rognan summarized SUU's human impact monitoring proposal addressed at the June HCAC meeting. SUU's monitoring efforts will be similar to NAU's efforts and similar to SUU's 2013 efforts. They would also like to incorporate some recovery actions each spring to recover certain areas. The proposed budget, (exhibit 3-d-1) shows approximately \$20,000/year. Cameron felt that since SUU is charging more than NAU, then perhaps the focus can be more on recovery actions. It is known where the problem areas are and it would be good to see improvement to the damaged areas.

Ann McLuckie stated that SUU's collected data is an objective overview of how humans and recreation impacts the Reserve. Over time there is habitat degradation and Ann wants the data to show if the trail width is expanding.

Chairman Brown would like at least three years of data from SUU which can be used to help balance BLM's efforts. Ann added that different managing entities need to have their needs addressed by this human impact monitoring. Kristen Comella stated that the State Park would like to make each trail sustainable. Trail width isn't as important to her because there is always a zone of impact on each side of the trail. Human nature causes people to be curious and step off the trail. Kristen doesn't feel the trails should become like highways but it would be nice to place the focus on uniform signage, water bars, and whatever else will help people hike on a designated trail. Ann added that families don't hike single file, they hike abreast. The TC felt concern if there becomes a push from the BLM to have more single track trails. Kristen stated that many Reserve trails weren't planned; they are existing roads which were already disturbed. It would be helpful to figure out how to keep the trails sustainable and usable. Cameron reminded the TC that the data is only a snapshot of one day out of the year.

Chairman Brown felt that SUU needs to meet with the BLM and HCP staff at the same time so that everyone can be on the same page. The TC reviewed the budget proposal from SUU. Kristen stated that Snow Canyon will soon have a Recreation Management Plan with the idea to align higher visitation with keeping people on trails. The Park will want to know over time if their efforts are working which makes SUU's data critical.

If a trail is having heavy off trail impacts, those trails need to be closed or reduced to certain users instead of multi-users. This budget of \$20,000 needs to be translated into hard decisions and needs to show some real results. Most of the Reserve is BLM land and they can manage it how they feel best, but SUU's data can be used to help them make their decisions. They are also willing to do on-the-ground trail work.

e. Review and possible action of the 2015 HCP draft budget

The committee reviewed exhibit 3-e-1, a draft HCP budget for 2015. Ann McLuckie stated the DWR is proposing to increase the amount given to the DWR for monitoring from \$80,000 to \$97,300. The DWR will provide a scope of work to outline the details. Initially the DWR hired technicians at \$6.55 per hour. In order to attract quality biologists, the DWR needs to increase this to more than \$12 per hour. Some of the DWR's efforts include picking up tortoises found outside the Reserve and translocating them. The DWR also monitors with cameras, monitors in translocation areas, and completes their regular monitoring in the Reserve. Kristen suggested changing the budget's explanation with human impact monitoring to include recovery actions.

MOTION by Kristen Comella to approve the draft budget with an increase to the DWR's reserve monitoring from \$80,000 to \$97,300 and human impact monitoring from \$4,000 to \$20,000.

Seconded by Gary McKell.

Discussion: None.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

4. OTHER REPORTS FROM TC MEMBERS AND REQUESTS FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

Ann McLuckie reported the DWR has set up remote cameras along the culverts of Red Hills Parkway and wants to use them for at least two years. Although they have spotted wildlife using the culverts, tortoises have not used them yet for a movement corridor. The DWR received funding to purchase the cameras, accessories and security features.

Kristen Comella reported that permanent fencing along most backyards in the Ledge's newer development has not occurred. This is on the west side of SR-18, next to the Gila trail. One of the fenced homes has a gate which allows private entrance into Snow Canyon State Park. Kristen would like to have the County check the fencing agreements or county ordinance regarding fencing responsibilities and take care of this issue. The law enforcement book has all the ordinances.

5. NEXT MEETING DATES

a. **August 14, 2014**

6. ADJOURN

<p><u>MOTION</u> by Ann McLuckie to adjourn. <u>Seconded</u> by Kristen Comella. <u>Discussion</u>: None. <u>Vote was taken</u>: All voted aye. <u>Motion passed</u>.</p>
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The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m.
 Minutes prepared by Amber Stocks.