

HABITAT CONSERVATION TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

for the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)

A regular meeting of the Habitat Conservation Technical Committee (TC) was held remotely using Zoom on **September 10, 2025.**

Members present:

John Kellam
Danielle Costantini
Mike Schijf
Sarah Seegert

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Washington County HCP Biologist
Utah Division of Natural Resources (UDNR)

Members excused:

Elaine York
Scott Chamberlain

Nature Conservancy, Biologist-at-Large
TLA, Local Biologist

Also present were:

Cameron Rognan
Randee Sanders
Devin Snow
Ann McLuckie
Jason West, *briefly*

Washington County HCP Administrator
Washington County HCP Executive Assistant
Washington County Attorney
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR)
Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

1. CALL TO ORDER

Cameron Rognan noted that a quorum existed and called the meeting to order at 1:01.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. August 13, 2025

MOTION by: Mike Schijf
Seconded: John Kellam
Discussion: To approve the minutes.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

3. GENERAL BUSINESS

a. Discuss Tortoise Translocation Management Plan and possible action

Cameron began by reading the TC Assignment (see exhibit 3a&b_1).

Mike Schijf said that beginning in 2023, there was a switch from using Zone 4/Babylon as the primary translocation area to Zone 3/Grapevine area. The

strategy has been to drive tortoises to the very end of the Grapevine utility road and then walk the tortoises in to find a good release location, such as an existing burrow or rock shelter. TLA has expressed some concern with translocations incurring on their lands in the Reserve, so all translocations have been on BLM lands.

Mike continued, saying that the Translocation Management Plan is open-ended enough that there is a potential for other areas to be used for translocation as well. Of particular concern, there have been two instances of translocated tortoise road mortalities on I-15 just in the past year. Mike speculated that there may have been even more mortalities, since not all tortoises that get squashed on I-15 are found. Translocated tortoises have been moving from their release sites, which could be due to it being a drought year and they are on the move looking for forage. Ann McLuckie's 2025 monitoring report captures findings of a lot of tortoise mortality, particularly in the Zone 3 area. Mike wondered if that may influence how to proceed with translocation.

Danielle Costantini wondered how many translocations are done in a year. Mike answered that it really varies from one year to the next. This spring, somewhere in the range of 3-5 tortoises were released in the Grapevine area.

Cameron asked if either of the hit tortoises were among those that were translocated this year. Mike answered that one of them was translocated this spring, and he believes the other one was translocated last fall.

Danielle inquired about the state of the fence along I-15 where the tortoises were hit. Cameron responded that HCP staff does fence inspections on that portion of fence each year, and always need to do some repairs. Dylan Thomas, the HCP Field Technician, made some repairs during his routine inspections this year. After the two deceased tortoises were found, he went out again and found additional damage that he repaired. He was out there again earlier this week and repaired a significant portion of fence that was damaged from the recent rains. The fencing situation is always in flux. Cameron never looks at the fence as a permanent barrier. It's definitely going to slow down most tortoises, but if tortoises are persistent they can get across the fence.

John Kellam said that you can drive to the Grapevine translocation area on a 1.8 mile utility road directly north from I-15 (or about 2.3 miles from the trailhead). It abuts unburned land with nice areas of friable soils and shrub lands. There is also complex topography with basalt and sandstone, and plenty of places for winter shelters. It is really good habitat. The tortoises that were hit on the highway moved quite a bit, as often translocated tortoises do. He didn't think there is a problem with the habitat itself, rather the barrier of

the fence. He would hate to discount a site with such high habitat quality and good access because of a fencing issue.

When you go through the Cottonwood trailhead gate, you can drive in about a mile, veer to the left, and head up Cottonwood Hills for about a mile near the wilderness boundary. That area is outside of both the 2005 and 2020 burn scars. It has similar habitat to what is found on the north end of Grapevine with dunes, shrub lands, and rocky areas. It is an area that has complex topography and could be another option. Even though it is closer to the highway, it drops down from that area to the west and there is some really good habitat out there. There is a less dense tortoise population as well.

Although John hasn't spent as much time in the Middleton area, he has hiked up there and that area has been burned. Perhaps the County has more knowledge because of the weed treatments done on TLA land up there.

John thought there is good habitat quality at most sites. We just need to have more due diligence on the fencing and/or try out the area by Cottonwood trailhead/Cottonwood Hills. John offered to prepare a map to show the TC members where he is thinking. Cameron shared his screen to show the areas John was speaking of on an ArcGIS map (see exhibit 3a&b_2, which is a snapshot of the same map).

Cameron had considered the Cottonwood location in the past, and always thought it would be a pretty good spot as well. He suggested that even going further up Cottonwood Canyon may be good. There are very few tortoises up there and the habitat looks ideal. It is probably the same distance, or could even be closer to the freeway, but that area of the fencing is not destroyed like it is by Grapevine. Grapevine requires a lot of ongoing repairs, whereas HCP staff haven't had to make many frequent repairs in that general vicinity. John thought that UDOT just professionally re-fenced that area, and Cameron confirmed that they had.

Mike updated his earlier report, saying that this spring 5 tortoises were translocated into the Grapevine area, and there are another 3-4 tortoises that are still potentially going to be released this fall. He also dug up the translocation data from last year, and it looks like there was a total of 19 tortoises that were translocated in 2024. Of those 19, several were relatively small juveniles under 100 millimeters. Probably only about 12 of those were teens and adult tortoises. He hoped that it would give more context for the two tortoises hit on I-15. That number is going to fluctuate each year. With this being a dry year, we haven't had nearly as many tortoise calls.

Once Ann is able to join the meeting, Cameron thought a question relevant to the discussion is regarding the high number of mortalities/carcasses found throughout the DWR monitoring effort. Cameron would like to better

understand where those occur, because if it is in either the Cottonwood or Grapevine areas, we may want to steer clear. If there is a disease or something that we could avoid, it would be wise to kind of shift away from those death zones.

John thought he could speak to that a little bit because he assisted during his field surveys this spring. John located at least 10 of the tortoise carcasses in the western part of Zone 3 near SR-18, and subsequently Ann and her crew were out doing line distance transect surveys to the north and east of there and found something like 5 in one day. Marshall Topham was really the one who called this to notice. 5-7 carcasses were found in Industrial Wash. They were largely adults, and none the ones that John located showed sign of predation or of injury. Most of the time, the carcasses had all of their fleshy parts still.

From John's experience, he suspected that the majority of the tortoise carcasses were located on that western part of Zone 3. However, Ann would have a better perspective of the whole Reserve. Mike thought that would be really good to know. All of the areas in Zone 3 that we would consider for translocation would likely be the lower density areas east of Cottonwood Road, as opposed to west of Cottonwood where we know the densities are fairly high. Obviously, we would need to defer to the specifics in that translocation plan.

Because Ann's perspective would be valuable, Mike suggested the committee table this part of the assignment until she arrives.

MOTION by: Mike Schijf

Seconded: John Kellam

Discussion: To table assignment 1 & 2, and jump down to assignment 3 until later in the meeting after Ann McLuckie joins.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

After discussing assignment 3, and with Ann McLuckie in attendance, the conversation looped back to finishing the discussion of assignments 1 and 2.

Ann McLuckie reported that DWR observed a total of 79 shell remains. Of those, 55 were on transects. Most of the shells were observed in management Zone 3, 8 were found in Zone 2, and 2 were found in Zone 4. None were found in Zone 5. DWR estimated that 60 of the total shells were tortoises that had died within the past year (27 males, 25 females, and 8 juveniles). The majority of the tortoises exhibited advanced shell wear, so they are older tortoises with growth rings that were pretty much worn smooth. A lot of the tortoises were classified into age class 6 or 7.

Mike asked Ann if she could recall if the carcasses were found east or west of Cottonwood Road. Ann answered that she didn't think they were concentrated in one particular area, they were spread out throughout Zone 3.

Ann said that translocated tortoises do have long distance movements. There have been several studies (such as Kim Field's and other segregate studies done in 2007 and 2012) that show that when tortoises are released, they can walk long distances. Some of Kim Field's released tortoises walked up to 6 kilometers from their translocation site.

One of the two tortoises that died had been translocated in the fall of 2024, and the other one had been translocated in spring 2025. One had walked 3.7 kilometers and the other 4.1 kilometers from their release sites. They were both found near Exit 13. One was immediately to the right as you get off the exit, and the other was between the interstate and the southbound exit ramp by the trail. Both tortoises came from different areas, and in both cases, they could have moved on their own or were helped by humans. Recently there was a tortoise crossing Highway 56 in Cedar City that was filed. It came from 1000 E., just north of St. George Boulevard on the east end of the Reserve. It obviously was moved by a human.

Mike asked if both of the tortoises hit on the highway were adults. To which Ann responded that they were (250 & 217 millimeters). They were also both males.

Cameron wondered how many tortoises have been translocated into the Grapevine area. Mike answered that there were 5 this spring and 19 total last year. A number of those from last year were small juveniles. We first started releasing tortoises in the Grapevine area in fall of 2023. Mike speculated there have been around 30 total.

Ann inquired if the holes in the fence have been identified and repaired. Cameron recounted the three instances of fence inspections and repairs done this year to date, as discussed earlier in the meeting. There may be less issues with the fence as you go where topography is a little bit more level, such as the spot John proposed up by Cottonwood trailhead. UDOT rebuilt all of that fence, so that's something for Ann to consider as another potential site we can discuss.

John recounted his thoughts and suggestions on the three different translocation sites with Ann, as noted earlier in the meeting. Mike then asked if the broader Cottonwood Canyon area was identified as a potential translocation spot in the DWR Translocation Management Plan. To which Cameron, Ann, and John all confirmed that it was. John said that was why he brought it up. It is a low tortoise density area, its unburned, and may be worth considering. Cameron asked Ann if she noticed a high number of shells in

that area. She answered that she would have to revisit to know for sure, but she was fairly certain that there were. She didn't think there was a place in Zone 3 where there were no shell remains.

Cameron wondered if it be helpful to put some transmitters on a few of the translocated tortoises to see where they are going. If the County were able to use some Adaptive Management funds to purchase those, would DWR be able to monitor those tortoises? Ann said she was certainly open to that, but wondered what more it would tell us other than that tortoises travel long-distances when translocated. Mike countered that it may change our approach if it shows us that half of the released tortoises end up on I-15.

Ann suggested to also factor in that from fall of 2024 to spring 2025 there was a significant drought. This was reflected in the number of dead tortoises seen while monitoring, as well as the state of the TCF with hardly any annuals for the tortoises to eat. One thing that Kim Field has said is that translocation itself does not strongly influence mortality rates, while drought does. Kim recommends releasing tortoises in non-drought years. Mike agreed that the drought likely played a factor in the movement of the tortoises, but suggested that it would take away some of the mystery of their movements if we radio-transmitted them.

Cameron said that tortoises are going to move, but where they move is important. If the Cottonwood area is selected as a translocation site, it is possible instead of heading south to the burn scar, they will go north and not hit the freeway. He thought that's where a radio-transmitter would be helpful because it will tell us where they are going to go. Mike added, even if not every tortoise has a transmitter, we may still have a large enough sample to be able to tell us something.

Ann wondered if they would have access to some of the monitoring funds. Cameron replied that he thought so. That fund may have been maxed out for this year, but there may be a different funding bucket to pull from. Certainly, if everyone agrees it is worthy to monitor some of the translocated tortoises to verify they are traveling to safer places instead of more dangerous ones, then he thought we could definitely justify using HCP funds.

Ann suggested to potentially translocate in both Grapevine and Cottonwood areas. Cameron agreed, saying it might be a good comparative from putting transmitters on a few in each location and watch their movements.

MOTION by: John Kellam

Seconded: Mike Schijf

Discussion: That the TC sees a need to investigate translocation sites and movements of tortoises. They are going to collectively look at using HCP funds or other available resources to start a pilot program where tortoises have transmitters placed on them and they are monitored post release at Cottonwood and Grapevine Wash.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

b. Discuss HCP Tortoise Clearance Protocol and possible action

Cameron gave an overview on how the HCP's commitment to perform surveys on non-federal lands throughout the County where there was limited knowledge of tortoise distribution has been going the past 5 years. They are nearing the end with only a few surveys that need to be completed.

The map (exhibit 3a&b_2) shows where HCP staff have and have not found tortoises to date during their surveys. Everything highlighted in red are locations on non-federal private and state lands with no tortoise sign found. Cameron feels confident calling those areas unoccupied. Everything highlighted green had tortoise sign or live tortoises, and are considered occupied. The areas highlighted with yellow crosshatches are places that HCP staff hasn't fully surveyed yet. They may not be able to get into some of those areas due to them being fenced or posted as no trespassing, but Cameron hopes to get into at least a few more of them before the end of the year.

There were no tortoises found beyond what was already known about in most areas searched to the east towards Springdale. However, there are a few exceptions such as north and east of the Zone 4/Babylon area where HCP staff found either tortoise tracks, tortoise scat, or live tortoises. Cameron proposes to add those areas to the incidental take areas required for survey search and removals prior to disturbance.

Cameron continued, saying that he does think that the population has been expanding from Zone 4 (which was previously the translocation site). The scat and the tracks that he observed during his surveys indicated that a lot of juvenile sub-adult tortoises were dispersing further away from Zone 4. However, the most recent sighting was an adult tortoise. He is grateful that Grapevine LLC worked with the County and allowed them to do a tortoise search and removal. HCP staff didn't find any on their property, but they know that there are still some within that vicinity. HCP staff weren't allowed to get on the private property to the east of Babylon, but there was fresh tortoise scat on neighboring BLM property so they presume everything in between is likely occupied tortoise habitat as well.

Other occupied habitats were pointed out on the map, as can be seen on the exhibit (colored in green).

Ann wondered if a lot of the occupied habitats were determined from citizen science reports. Cameron answered that it was largely from the county-wide survey effort. However, if the County received citizen science records, oftentimes they accepted the confirmed observation as occupied habitat and did not fully survey the area.

John wondered if the County used the updated heritage database. Cameron answered that the database was used at the onset of the study. If they already knew it was occupied habitat based off of the heritage database, they didn't bother going in and re-surveying those areas.

John suggested that it would be really useful if Cameron would send the shape files to the TC members. Then they could compare and see if they have any data on their records that can identify adjacent areas, or even areas not accounted for on the map. Cameron said he would share it.

Mike said that there are some private lands where they haven't been able to get into to survey. If those lands are adjacent to BLM land, they have been surveying the adjacent BLM land to use as a segregate for potential occupation on the private lands. The County has been doing 100-meter spaced transects. They have worked north-south or east-west, depending on the topography. They have not been doing a full coverage survey, because they are trying to establish presence/absence.

Cameron wasn't expecting the TC members to make any decisions on this yet since the County hasn't fully completed the surveys. However, he wanted to see if any members had additional guidance before the surveys are completed. He is happy to share the shapefiles so they can be used to compare data and see if anyone has reports of tortoises anywhere where the County hasn't recorded them. The new take areas can be finalized when the TC meets again.

MOTION by: Mike Schijf

Seconded: Danielle Costantini

Discussion: Once the surveys have been completed, and the TC members have pooled all of their data; the areas identified as occupied on the tortoise occupied habitat map will be the new take areas. In coordination with the developer, those areas will require full coverage clearance surveys before construction activities take place.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

4. ADMINISTRATOR UPDATES

a. Update on fire near Temporary Care Facility

Cameron reported that there was a fire near the Temporary Care Facility (TCF) in Confluence Park. The firefighters dropped retardant over the facility in an effort to protect the tortoises. HCP staff have since gone in and removed as many tortoises as they could. The ones that needed to be held onto were moved to far side of the facility where it was not as affected by the fire retardant.

Mike said that there are probably about 7 tortoises still at the TCF. Some of them are going to be going to Joe Platt for Black Desert Resort's education facility. The HCP actually had to go down there and wash the retardant off of several tortoises. The vast majority of the tortoises are captive, thankfully there were only a couple of wild tortoises there at the time to worry about toxicity. A fire official told Cameron that the toxicity of the retardant is less toxic than fire itself.

Cameron hopes for some rains to clear up the retardant so that there won't be any lasting effects. The HCP is working with DWR to try and get some restoration funds for that fire. Ann said that Jessica Kinross is taking the lead on getting those fire restoration dollars. The application proposal is due this Friday. Jessica's proposal is to seed about 12 acres outside of the perimeter of the fire as well as the TCF. This is because it would be good to get some more native vegetation in the TCF for tortoise forage. The type of seed is dependent on what seeds are available, but Globe mallow would be a good one. The TCF has sandy soil, which will make it a little bit more challenging, but they hope to get some grasses and forage.

Cameron offered that HCP staff could hand plant and/or push seeds under the soil if needed. Mike agreed, saying it is something to look into this fall. Some of the enclosures are pretty barren right now with the sand sage dying off in them. There are still enough enclosures with decent cover for the amount of tortoises we have now, but the good enclosures are slim picking for the occasions when there are more tortoises at the TCF.

John is finalizing plans for a BLM planting project this November. Sun Dog Native Plant Nursery in Lake Mead will be providing them with about 800 plants. Some of the plants are at least 2-year old shrubs, including Globe mallow, Brittlebush, Creosote, etc. BLM will likely be planting them out in the Cottonwood area. John said he would gladly donate some of the plants for the TCF. The plants will be grown in 1 gallon pots with really nice soil, so they should be hearty and do well at the facility. Cameron responded that the HCP would gladly take the donated plants and put them in the ground. Mike agreed, and thanked John for the offer. He requested that John let him know what species might be potentially up for grabs so that they could figure out which would do better in the sandy soils found there.

Without making any promises, John said he will have two crews lined for the project. If it works out where they have enough time, he could potentially have one of the crews caravan over to dig the holes and put the plants in as a part of their project. It is something to consider and talk more about later.

b. Tortoise monitoring in the Reserve and Zone 6

The County worked with Matt Bandy/Resi Solutions to fly a drone over Zone 6 during the same time period as DWR's survey efforts in Zones 2-5. Fortunately, Zone 6 is not seeing a die off. Only a couple of carcasses were picked up by the drone. Estimates for Zone 6 have been increasing with each successive monitoring effort. This year was the highest noted to date, with 32.6 tortoises per square kilometer.

Because some of the tortoises that DWR encountered were recently deceased and looked alive from a distance, Ann wondered if it might be difficult to tell between a live and dead tortoise with aerial photos. Cameron said that Matt used a 61-megapixel camera. Although he flew higher than previously, the pixel density is even better than what it was before. Matt will be presenting an oral report of his findings at the next HCAC meeting, which would be a good time to ask him about how he verified whether the tortoise were alive or dead. If a tortoise recently died, Matt may have a hard time knowing.

5. **NEXT MEETING DATES**

- a. **2nd Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m., as needed. Possible dates/times remaining for the year: 10/8, 11/12, & 12/10.**

John announced that he won't be available on November 12th. It will be the last day of his planting project.

Sarah Seegert announced that her family has relocated to Massachusetts. She is working remotely until the end of the year. The Division will be discussing her replacement and who will be best to serve on the Technical Committee, which may not be one in the same.

6. **ADJOURN**

MOTION by: Danielle Costantini
Seconded by: Sarah Seegert
Discussion: To adjourn the meeting.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:14.
 Minutes prepared by Randee Sanders.