

Desert Tortoise Clearance Protocol: Amendment to Attachment A

Last Revised December 2025

Background

Protocols for Mojave desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) clearance surveys were established in the original Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) in 1997 and were subsequently amended in 2008. In accordance with the Amended HCP (2020), these protocols have been updated to include new data regarding tortoise distribution in Washington County, and to incorporate the latest guidance from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) described in *Preparing for any Action that may occur within the Range of the Mojave Desert Tortoise (Gopherus agassizii; USFWS 2018)*.

As recommended under the 1997 and 2008 protocols, tortoise clearance surveys should continue to be completed in all take areas adjacent to the Reserve where existing tortoise habitat remains. These take areas have been expanded to include additional occupied habitat (Figure 1) based on extensive presence/absence surveys conducted by HCP staff between 2021 and 2025.

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Attachment A also includes details on handling eggs, tortoise facility, etc.

Changes since 1997 to the agreed upon protocol for clearances in desert tortoises incidental take areas within Washington County:

- Clearances in take areas not adjacent to the Reserve or in previously cleared areas or in potential habitat without confirmed tortoise presence (Figure 1) are voluntary and have no mandatory protocols.
- Presence/Absence and Search and Removal surveys will be completed prior to habitat alteration during clearance windows (3/15–5/15 and 8/20–10/20) and will be valid for up to 90 days and are extended indefinitely if fencing is installed per an approved fencing agreement.
- Presence/Absence surveys will be completed for all clearances in take areas adjacent to the Reserve (e.g. Winchester Hills, North Washington, etc.). Current Presence/Absence survey protocols include:
 - a. 100% coverage of the survey area (parallel passes via 10-meter belt transect spacing) in addition to a zone of influence transect 200 feet from the perimeter of the survey area.

- b. If fresh sign (less than one year old, Class 1 to 4¹) is found in either the zone of influence transect or the survey area, removal survey protocols will be initiated. The effort expended on the Presence/Absence survey will count toward the first pass on the removal survey.
- c. The zone of influence transect is not required in areas with fenced perimeters.
- d. If no sign is found in either the Presence/Absence survey area or zone of influence, then no removal surveys are required.
 - Removal surveys are required when Presence/Absence surveys reveal the presence of tortoises. Removal surveys are mandatory for all clearances in incidental take areas bordering the Reserve and other confirmed occupied habitats (Figure 1). Current Removal protocols include:
 - a. Clearances will be conducted by observers walking parallel transects spaced 10-meters apart to obtain complete (100%) coverage of the area. Each 100% coverage is considered one pass.
 - b. Each successive pass must be conducted in the morning between 8 am and ending no later than 2 pm. If a suspected tortoise cannot be found during the morning survey window, or if temperatures are more suitable for tortoise activity, passes may be conducted during the afternoon from 2 pm – 6 pm. Surveys shall be completed during ambient temperatures between 60 –100 Fahrenheit.
 - c. A minimum of two complete passes will be conducted on all take areas.
 - d. Additional passes will be completed until at least one of the passes results in a “Zero” pass, a pass where no live tortoises greater than 180 mm in midline carapace length (MCL) are found. For large survey areas, survey passes (following the initial pass) may be reduced to a smaller portion of the action/survey area if tortoise sign is confined to a small portion of the total action area.
 - e. All tortoises encountered on take areas during clearances will be removed to the Washington County Temporary Holding Facility or County Administration Building and held in isolation pending health assessments.
 - f. At least two rounds of health assessments (spaced 10 days apart) will be conducted prior to release by UDWR in coordination with the HCP biologist.
 - g. Tortoises considered healthy will be eligible for release into a translocation area identified in the Translocation Management Plan (UDWR 2023) or the most recent UDWR plan. The disposition flow chart in Appendix B (page 15) of this plan will be followed when considering whether a tortoise is eligible for translocation.

h. A desert tortoise visual health assessment worksheet will be completed for each tortoise, which will ultimately determine its translocation eligibility (see Appendix D/page 18 of the Translocation Management Plan). Additional criteria for translocation eligibility is described in *Health Assessment Procedures for the Mojave Desert Tortoise (Gopherus agassizii): A Handbook Pertinent to Translocation* (USFWS 2019). This handbook will serve as a reference for any specific procedures that may not be covered in the UDWR Translocation Management Plan.

¹The relative age of tortoise scat is estimated using a condition classification based on visual observations (USFWS, 1992. Field Survey protocol for any federal and non-federal action that may occur within the range of the desert tortoise, Reno, Nevada, 22 pp).

Class 1 includes scat that is still wet (not from rain or dew) or freshly dried (<1 week).

Class 2 scat is dried with glaze and dark brown (<1 month).

Class 3 scat is dry with no glaze, partially bleached (light brown), and consists of tightly packed material (1 to 6 months).

Class 4 includes scat that is dry, light brown to pale yellow in color, consists of loose material, and has a scaly appearance (6 months to 1 year).

Class 5 scat is completely bleached and consists only of plant fiber (1–2 years).

Figure 1. Washington County HCP - Tortoise Habitat Status

December 2025

