

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 **December 10, 2025.**

Members present:

John Kellam
Danielle Costantini
Mike Schijf
Scott Chamberlain
Elaine York

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Washington County HCP Biologist
SITLA, Local Biologist
Nature Conservancy, Biologist-at-Large

Members excused:

Sarah Seegert

Utah Division of Natural Resources (UDNR)

Also present were:

Cameron Rognan
Randee Sanders
Ann McLuckie
Alyssa Hoekstra
Alma Baste

Washington County HCP Administrator
Washington County HCP Executive Assistant
DWR
DWR

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

Cameron Rognan noted that a quorum existed and called the meeting to order at 1:02.

2. **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

a. **September 10, 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. **Monitoring proposal in support of Tortoise Translocation Management Plan and possible action**

At the last meeting, the TC members discussed setting up a study to evaluate the movement of tortoises in two different locations. Both in the Grapevine area, as well as a new location near the Cottonwood Wilderness area.

Ann McLuckie joined the meeting to share her draft proposal (see exhibit 3a). At the last meeting, it was proposed to consider releasing tortoises in the

Cottonwood Wash area within the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area due to two mortality events of tortoises that were released approximately 3.7 & 4.1 kilometers from the Grapevine Trailhead. Apparently, both tortoises moved long distances toward the trailhead, found compromised fencing, and then got hit by a vehicle. This called to question if Cottonwood Wash may be a better location for translocation than Grapevine Wash. It also brought on a desire to better understand why those tortoises ended up near that trailhead and what their movements were. There was an increase in tortoise mortality due to drought this year, and Ann wondered if the tortoises were responding to the lack of food and moving long distances to get to “greener pastures”.

DWR’s proposal is to put transmitters and GPS units on a few tortoises in both the Grapevine and Cottonwood Wash sites, and track them through GPS satellites hourly during their active period and every four hours during their inactive period. UDWR would also conduct weekly site visits to determine the tortoise’s status and the specifics on what type of habitat they’re using. Doing so will allow them to download data, look at specific movement patterns, check site fidelity, see how quickly tortoises are establishing their home range, and see what types of habitat they prefer. That data will give UDWR a better idea how translocated tortoises are establishing themselves post-release and evaluate the differences between the Cottonwood Wash and the Grapevine areas.

To date, UDWR has released 50 tortoises into the Grapevine wash, prior to that (1999 to 2023) they had released 587 tortoises into Zone 4. They have observed and documented an increase in density and shelter sites in Zone 4. Some tortoises have been encountered multiple times over that time period, and the survival rates are similar to adjacent populations like City Creek.

Ann included a few suggestions she had received from Cameron in the draft. One was to not exceed 10% of the tortoise’s body mass when they attach the transmitter and the GPS unit in order to minimize behavioral and negative effects associated with the extra weight. Another was to ensure that post-release monitoring includes welfare checks and mortality investigations, when appropriate. If a translocated tortoise exhibits unsafe behavior like pacing a boundary fence, or has a low body condition score and/or is emaciated, UDWR will respond to ensure the safety and the well-being of the tortoise.

Cameron inquired if there would be any controls in the study. Ann answered that Area 31 (UDWR’s long-term telemetry site) will serve as their control. Those tortoises have transmitters, and have been tracked since the late 90’s. However, they will not be applying GPS units to those tortoises. UDWR will go out there multiple times during the week to track them, but they won’t be collecting hourly data on them.

Mike Schijf asked Ann to elaborate more about how the one & four-hour data would be collected. Ann answered that the satellite GPS can be set to gather a pre-determined amount of data. She thought one hour would be interesting, especially in the immediate days after release. They don't have to do every four hours during the winter time, but she thought it'd be good to at least gather data a few times during the day. What's interesting about satellite GPS units, though, is when the tortoise goes into a burrow the error rate increases dramatically. It'll be interesting to see how dramatic that error rate will be.

Cameron wondered if it would be beneficial to have a control with satellite GPS so they can compare like-to-like. Ann replied that she didn't want to put satellite GPS units on the resident tortoises in Area 31. Cameron wondered if maybe a couple adult tortoises in the Grapevine area could get GPS units to compare their movements with the translocated tortoises to see if their movements are much different. Ann suggested it may be better for the control to not have extra weight to compare what a tortoise is doing without it. Cameron wondered how comparable that would be, due to not having hourly data.

Mike wondered if the reluctance to put a GPS transmitter on the telemetry tortoises in Area 31 is because they don't want to disturb those animals. Ann answered in the affirmative. UDWR uses those tortoises while during surface activity monitoring. They don't want to put extra weight and change their behavior, especially during a monitoring year.

Each GPS unit is fairly expensive (roughly \$1,000). The TC members agreed that the proposal should specify up to 10 tortoises to be monitored.

Mike thought it would be good to get a good apples-to-apples comparison between the spring and fall translocations. He suggested to compare the same age/sex classes so they're not comparing female tortoises in the springtime versus males in the fall, or juveniles in the springtime versus adults in the fall, etc. Ann said that UDWR would only be putting satellite GPS units on adult tortoises, but agreed that tortoises released in the fall could exhibit different behavior from those released in the spring. They could confine it to tortoises released in the spring. Cameron suggested if there are 10 tortoises eligible for translocation this upcoming spring, to do all of them. Otherwise, the remaining units should be done in fall.

Mike wondered if tortoises are more likely to move longer distances during one of those two windows. If so, he thought that may be good information to capture. For example, it would be good to know if translocated tortoises move significantly longer distances during one of the two translocation windows. Ann thought that the sample size will be too small to really determine if those differences are individual tortoise differences or if they're differences that can be applied to all tortoises and populations. It requires a large sample size to

understand the patterns. Mike was thinking in terms of the two translocated tortoises that showed up dead on I-15, it would be good to know if tortoises are less likely to move as far during one of those windows. Ann responded that one of the deceased tortoises was released in the spring, and the other in the fall.

Cameron suggested that depending on the results of this initial study, there could be a phase two study done in the fall to evaluate the differences between the two windows. However, he agreed with Ann to get as much data as they can now. It could be fine-tuned later if there are more questions to be addressed. Ann added it would be really hard to determine what the actual best window is due to all of the variables, such as weather as well.

John Kellam offered to send Ann a draft polygon of the Cottonwood area to help with her proposal, which can be shared with the TC members. He fully supports this project, and may have a technician this spring who can assist with the monitoring effort should it be wanted.

MOTION by: Mike Schijf

Seconded by: Elaine York

Discussion: To approve the proposal with a change in the language to allow for “up to 10 tortoises” to be monitored this spring. If there are not that many tortoises to be translocated in the springtime, the remaining units can be used next fall.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

b. HCP Tortoise Clearance Protocol and possible action

Cameron began the discussion by sharing one of two maps which shows the HCP’s presence/absence survey coverage done over the past four years. They have been completed as much as possible. However, there are certain polygons that they were unable to visit due to issues with access, no trespassing, live ordinances, or they were too steep/cliffy. In some instances when they couldn't access a site, if there was BLM land surrounding it, they took surrogate surveys on the BLM land instead of the private land. That helped the HCP to find tortoise sign in a couple of situations, but for the most part, tortoises were generally where the HCP expected them to be with only a few minor surprises. Cameron reviewed the map with the TC members, bringing attention to the different areas that either had no sign, sign, or was unable to be surveyed (see exhibit 3b).

Cameron mentioned encountering tortoises just outside of Zone 4, and Ann wondered how he knew those tortoises originated from Zone 4. Cameron answered that he assumes they did, because they've never known adults to occur there and most of them were juveniles. He suspects that they were likely born in Zone 4 and moved out to find new territory when they got to dispersal age (about four or five years old).

Cameron then shared the second map showing the areas that are identified as occupied, cleared, or potential tortoise habitat (see exhibit 3b). The data is based off of the HCP's survey results as well as historical observations. Cameron had shared the shape files with the TC members prior to the meeting, and he wondered if any members were able to identify any locations that the HCP might be missing where tortoises do occur that haven't been accounted for on the map. Most of the TC members did not, but Scott Chamberlain had feedback for the lower country in south Zion along the east fork that Cameron had mentioned they had hoped to survey but weren't able to. Cameron said that the whole area is completely gated off, and the HCP had no access to get in there. Based off of the elevation, it could be potential tortoise habitat, but he has never actually had any reports or indication that they do occur there. Scott reported that he and his brothers grew up in Springdale, and even within the last few years they have found a tortoise. He offered to share the details with Cameron. It was found on BLM land, but he has seen them all over on the private land along some of the areas that have been chained and railed in the past. Some of that property has switched hands in the last few years, so the new owner may be more amenable.

Cameron thanked Scott for his report. He will add it to the database. He will reach out to some of the private property owners to let them know that the HCP may need to come in and do some surveys to verify if tortoises are still there, or if there is a bigger population than what was thought. The first map can be adaptive and be updated as new information is received. Cameron confirmed with the TC that they were okay leaving it as is with the assumption that the HCP will go back out there probably next spring to do some surveys to verify Scott's data points.

Cameron switched gears to share some changes to the Clearance Protocols. The original document with the tracked changes was put up on the screen and includes all of the proposed updates as well as changes suggested by TC members during the discussion that were applied to the document during the meeting (see exhibit 3b).

MOTION by: John Kellam

Seconded by: Elaine York

Discussion: To approve the revised HCP tortoise clearance protocol, including the updated maps, while understanding that more survey or investigation of possible forest population exists in the Zion East Fork area.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

4. ADMINISTRATOR UPDATES

a. Fire and fuels projects for 2025/2026

Mike Schijf took a field trip with Brad Winder (Washington County Noxious Weeds), Kristen Comella (SCSP), and David Montague (UDWR) to the Chuckwalla Trailhead yesterday. They weren't able to do too much scouting around, but they did look at a map and discussed an approach. Kristen has some additional polygons where she's mapped out some high-density Sahara mustard on the west side of Highway 18 down near the Cougar Cliffs area that they will want to address. They also talked about incorporating some additional treatment swaths further north on Highway 18. They may revise some of the existing identified areas such as the northern boundary north of Twist Hollow that follows the perimeter of an old burned area. There may be the potential to do a bit more than the thousand acres that was originally identified. Mike is in the process of finalizing some of the mapping, with the goal to have it completed and sent before the end of the week to allow time for a review. He hopes that early next week he can work with David to finalize a contract and get that out to bid.

John acknowledged Mike's efforts and all the collaboration being done on this project to pull together resources. He agreed that there is likely going to be a lot of weeds next year so he was glad that the group was getting on it. John does have \$32,500 in a WRI agreement. He asked David if there's a way he could add it to the agreement that he is working on with Mike, because it makes no sense to have an independent smaller project if they can just increase the scale of what will be done this winter.

b. Update on Northern Corridor Environmental Assessment

The BLM issued a draft Environmental Assessment in October that looked into some of the alternatives of the Northern Corridor, particularly the Red Hills Expressway. The public comment period closed about a month ago so there could be a new decision in the coming months. This may potentially re-trigger the changed circumstance and the establishment of Zone 6.

5. NEXT MEETING DATES

- a. **2nd Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m., as needed. Possible dates/times for 2026: 1/14, 2/11, 3/11, 4/8, 5/13, 6/10, 7/8, 8/12, 9/9, 10/14, 11/11, 12/9.**

November 11th will be Veteran's day, so the TC agreed to move the meeting to Tuesday the 10th instead.

6. ADJOURN

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

The meeting was adjourned at 1:53.
Minutes prepared by Randee Sanders.