

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 **August 19, 2026.**

Members present:

John Kellam
Danielle Costantini
Mike Schijf
Alyssa Hoekstra
Scott Chamberlain

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

Members excused:

Nature Conservancy, Biologist-at-Large

Also present were:

Cameron Rognan
Randee Sanders
Ann McLuckie
Kerry Holcomb
Brendan Botosan

Washington County HCP Administrator
Washington County HCP Executive Assistant
DWR
USFWS / DTRO
Conserve Southwest Utah

1. CALL TO ORDER

Cameron Rognan noted that a quorum existed and called the meeting to order at 1:08.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. June 10, 2026

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

3. GENERAL BUSINESS

a. Evaluate mitigation value of St. George City Open Space habitat

The committee then considered a request from St. George City concerning approximately 19.27 acres of open-space property adjacent to Zone 6 of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. The property consists of four parcels of approximately 14.5 acres, 3.11 acres, 1.33 acres, and 0.33 acres. The City is considering allowing tortoise fencing along the open-space boundary rather

than the existing Zone 6 boundary. The City would potentially use the property as mitigation for future projects, such as a road near the substation or a future trailhead, although no specific future project is currently proposed. The committee emphasized that this was a current, preliminary assessment rather than a final mitigation determination. Habitat conditions could change because of fire or other significant events, and any future project would require a project-specific reevaluation and comparison of impacts and mitigation needs. The committee also discussed the potential benefits of advanced mitigation because tortoises would remain in place, continue using the habitat, and potentially reproduce rather than being removed during future development-related clearance.

The committee reviewed the 2023 survey information and the August 18, 2026 resurvey of the four parcels. The 14.5-acre and 3.11-acre parcels had been surveyed in 2023 using standard Fish and Wildlife Service protocols, including 10-meter spacing and full coverage. Those surveys documented significant tortoise sign, including burrows, shelters, scat, and tracks. The August 18, 2026 walkthrough again found substantial tortoise sign, including fresh scat, new burrows, shelters, juvenile tracks, and eggshell fragments. The committee agreed that these two larger parcels represent good, occupied tortoise habitat and have substantial conservation value when incorporated into adjacent contiguous habitat.

The 1.33-acre and 0.33-acre parcels were surveyed with 100 percent coverage on August 18, 2026. No tortoise scat or active burrows were found. The committee nevertheless recognized that the habitat could be useful for tortoise forage and movement, particularly because washes run through the parcels. John noted that both smaller parcels have concentrated human-use impacts, including social trails originating from nearby homes. The committee discussed the likelihood that tortoises could use these smaller parcels seasonally or as transient forage or connectivity habitat even though resident tortoises were not documented. The smaller parcels were considered to have lower practical conservation value than the two larger parcels because of their size and human-use impacts.

The committee also discussed management of dogs, hikers, and other recreation users in the smaller open-space areas. St. George City indicated that dogs would remain subject to applicable leash requirements and that the areas were not intended to function as unrestricted dog parks. The committee supported installing reserve boundary signs and dog-on-leash signage at appropriate access points and stepovers. Mike noted that the HCP is already inventorying locations that need additional dog-on-leash signs and will include these Zone 6 areas. The final evaluation will identify fencing and signage as complementary management measures, and educational/conservation signage will be installed with the fencing.

Mike then presented the Fish and Wildlife Service evaluation spreadsheet for review, and together the TC filled it out. Their discussion is reflected in the finalized document (see exhibit 3a).

MOTION by: Danielle Costantini

Seconded: John Kellam

Discussion: To approve the evaluation document for the habitat associated with the proposed mitigation areas.

Vote was taken: All voted aye.

Motion passed.

b. TC Assignment: Consider conservation options for habitat islands and fragmented tortoise populations

The committee then continued its discussion of a TC assignment concerning conservation options for habitat islands and fragmented tortoise populations.

Regarding St. George Black Ridge, the committee reviewed additional maps and information concerning approximately 650 acres. The area consists primarily of rocky hillside habitat, while the flatter mesa top is planned for low-density development. Depending on the assumed tortoise density, the area could support approximately 25–26 adult tortoises at medium density or as many as approximately 80 tortoises at high density. Available observations indicate tortoises are distributed across portions of the mesa. A recent hatchling report suggests possible recruitment, although the committee noted that a hatchling observation alone does not establish recruitment of the population. Because the population is not actively monitored and available information relies substantially on citizen-science observations and limited field data, the committee agreed that additional biological and demographic information is needed before deciding how the population should ultimately be managed. The committee recommended obtaining additional biological and demographic data and reevaluating St. George Black Ridge before making a final conservation decision.

Members also discussed eventual coordination with St. George City. If long-term conservation of the area is considered appropriate, the city should be involved in developing compatible management approaches, potentially including tortoise fencing, signage, and public education. Members noted the potential educational and recreational value of maintaining tortoises in an urban open-space setting. Cameron agreed to contact St. George City to obtain its preliminary perspective on future plans for the area and report back at a subsequent meeting.

Regarding Middleton Black Ridge, the committee confirmed its previous recommendation. Most tortoises have already been removed, only limited

hillside habitat remains, and any remaining tortoises should continue to be removed and translocated to Zone 3.

For the Coral Canyon/Sienna Hills non-federal lands, the committee confirmed that most tortoises have also been removed, although a limited number of sub-adults may remain. Because the remaining habitat is threatened by ongoing development, the recommendation was revised to state that remaining tortoises should be translocated to a designated translocation site rather than specifically identifying Zone 3.

The committee had an extensive discussion concerning Long Valley and the appropriate treatment of tortoises found on private property adjacent to BLM and ACEC lands. Members discussed the distinction under existing protocol between relocating a previously marked tortoise to its original location and translocating a tortoise found more than 300 meters from a designated conservation area. The committee questioned whether a strict 300-meter distinction is always the best conservation strategy when multiple animals originate from the same general area. Concerns were also raised that tortoises relocated to nearby BLM lands could return to private property because of fencing gaps, terrain, or other conditions. Conversely, the committee recognized that translocation carries its own mortality risk and is not necessarily a guaranteed conservation benefit.

The committee also discussed anticipated development in the surrounding landscape, including private development, expansion of Long Valley development, the potential Warner Valley Reservoir, and additional roads. John emphasized that BLM currently has no plan to remove tortoises from large, intact ACEC and public-land areas merely because those areas may eventually become less viable. Mike clarified that his concern primarily concerned what should happen to tortoises after they have already moved onto private property, rather than advocating for removal of tortoises from BLM lands. The committee agreed that the broader long-term management question requires additional analysis. The Long Valley issue was therefore tabled pending further discussion and additional information.

Danielle agreed to assist with scheduling a separate meeting to address relocation versus translocation and the broader conservation strategy. Participants identified for that discussion included Cameron, Mike, Ann, Kerry, Danielle, Melinda, and Alyssa. The committee also noted that six hatchlings currently requiring translocation would need to be addressed promptly because the translocation window had opened.

For the fifth site, which is a take area with no nearby federal conservation land, the committee reached consensus that tortoises found in the area should be translocated because they are more than 300 meters from a

conservation area and there is no nearby federal land suitable for maintaining them. This approach is consistent with prior treatment of tortoises found in the area.

The committee next discussed LaVerkin Bench, an approximately 3,000-acre area with BLM land to the north and non-federal land to the south. Tortoise observations are sparse and the population is believed to be low-density. Some animals may be released captive tortoises rather than wild animals. The committee agreed that a full-scale proactive clearance is not warranted at this time. If field crews are available and time permits, limited opportunistic searches may be conducted, but management should generally remain reactive through the normal development and clearance process.

For Springdale, the committee reaffirmed its preliminary recommendation to maintain tortoises in Zion National Park and nearby areas because of the significant public outreach and educational value of the population.

The committee then discussed South Hurricane Cliffs, which includes primarily federal land with some TLA land and is not currently under immediate development pressure. Cameron reported repeatedly finding live tortoises and substantial tortoise sign despite limited survey effort. The committee agreed that the area may contain a larger tortoise population than currently documented and that additional survey work is warranted. The recommendation for South Hurricane Cliffs is therefore to continue evaluating the area and collect additional data before making a conservation decision.

Cameron stated that he would revise and clarify the recommendations from the discussion and circulate them to TC members by email for minor edits before they are presented to the HCAC.

4. ADMINISTRATOR UPDATES

a. Update on Northern Corridor Record of Decision and lawsuit

Cameron reported that there was nothing major to report regarding the Northern Corridor litigation. The plaintiffs had recently submitted their initial claims and summary-judgment materials. Defendants were expected to respond within several weeks, followed by responses from UDOT and the County toward the end of September. Additional responses were expected in October, after which the judge could issue a decision. The committee did not expect a decision immediately and anticipated that it could occur toward the end of 2026.

b. Zone 6 fencing and recreation planning

The committee also received an update on Zone 6 fencing and tortoise clearances. Work continues with developers on the Zone 6 fencing plan, and fencing for Quality Excavation has been completed. Tortoise removals were expected to begin around August 20. DeVario fencing is progressing, with portions already completed. Clearance work can begin in completed sections, while the remaining open-space boundaries discussed during the meeting will require several additional weeks of fencing. The east boundary of Zone 6 will ultimately undergo substantial tortoise clearance, which could result in an increased number of animals requiring temporary care or placement through the translocation program. The Division offered assistance with clearance efforts, and Friday was identified as the preferred day for Division assistance, although Monday, Wednesday, or Friday could work depending on crew availability.

5. NEXT MEETING DATES

- a. **2nd Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m., as needed. Possible dates/times for 2026: 9/9, 10/14, 11/10, 12/9.**

6. ADJOURN

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

The meeting was adjourned at 2:59.
 Minutes prepared by Randee Sanders.