

HABITAT CONSERVATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

for the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)

A **regular** meeting of the Habitat Conservation Advisory Committee (HCAC) was held at the Washington County Administration Building on **July 22, 2026.**

Committee members present were:

Chris Blake, Chairman	Environmental Organization
Kevin Bunnell, Vice Chair	Utah Dept. of Natural Resources (UDNR)
Jarett Waite	Mayors Association
Jason West	Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
George Weekley	U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Gregg McArthur	Local Development
Carmen Clark	Citizen-at-Large

Absent and Excused:

Austin Anderson	Citizen-at-Large
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Also present were:

Cameron Rognan	HCP Administrator
Randee Sanders	HCP Executive Assistant
Mike Schijf	HCP Biologist
Scott Barton	HCP Outreach Coordinator
Devin Snow	Washington County Attorney
Gary Webster	Senator Lee's office
Brendan Botosan	Conserve Southwest Utah
Todd Perkins	SGCC
<i>unidentified</i>	Stewardship Utah

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Chris Blake called the meeting to order at approximately 1:00 p.m. noting that a quorum was present.

2. CONSENT AGENDA

The Consent Agenda is a means of expediting routine matters which come before the committee for approval. The consent portion of the agenda is approved by one (1) non-debatable motion. If any member wishes to remove an item from the consent portion of the agenda, then that item becomes the first order of business on the regular agenda.

a. Approval of Agenda

b. Review and Approve Meeting Minutes

- 1. May 27, 2026**
- 2. June 12, 2026**

c. Next Meeting Date

1. Sept 23, 2026

MOTION by: Jason West
Seconded by: Kevin Bunnell
Discussion: To approve the Consent Agenda.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

3. DECLARATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

4. PRESENTATIONS

a. Outreach & Education Biannual Report, discussion & possible action – Scott Barton

Scott presented the 2026 biannual Outreach and Education report. He announced the August 26th kickoff event for the university MOU, which will include a signing ceremony with university leadership and the commissioners, community partners, student and faculty presentations, and Scott's presentation. Invitations will be sent out to the committee members.

Outreach efforts during the first two quarters reached 1,806 people through 20 events, with community events and the summer reading program being particularly successful. The summer reading program also saved the county library system approximately \$700 in outreach costs. Visitor Center attendance totaled 10,817, representing an approximately 25 percent increase over the same reporting period the prior year.

Scott reviewed several current outreach and education initiatives. Thirty-five fireworks-prohibited signs were installed across the Reserve, accompanied by a social media campaign before July 4th. No law-enforcement citations or warnings were issued across the Reserve on July 4th. The Reserve and Visitor Center have also joined Utah's Every Kid Outdoors initiative as a passport distribution center and community hub. Additional efforts include partnering with Utah Tech University students on service projects, completing a fellowship associated with the Red Cliffs Conservation Education Partnership, and adapting the Living Deserts Zoo and Garden's "Time to Talk Trash" raven program for Washington County.

Upcoming outreach events include the final summer reading program at New Harmony Library, Night at the Museum, Family Night at the Toniquint Nature Center, and the ReFall Summit at Black Desert Resort.

Visitor Center improvements include new interactive displays, including a tortoise tracks exhibit, while the museum's rotating exhibit is moving toward legal review concerning specimen use and maintenance responsibilities. Nine new interpretive trailhead kiosks are also being developed and standardized, and a new California condor display is being designed.

Scott also described plans for the Mojave Desert Outreach and Education Network, a proposed quarterly collaboration among organizations involved in desert tortoise education and outreach. Initial participants include the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, Living Desert Zoo and Gardens, Tortoise Group, Friends of Golden Butte, and the Clark County Desert Conservation Program/Mojave Max. The group will develop a shared digital repository of non-trademarked outreach materials, coordinate social-media cross-posting, and develop a "Connected to Mojave" short-form video series highlighting people, science, stewardship, recreation, and arts associated with the Mojave Desert.

Community science efforts included installation of eight raven signs that generated 25 unique reports and 12 tortoise sighting signs in Warner Valley, which have already generated several reports.

Scott reported that social-media engagement has been especially strong for interactive "rattle radar" and "spot the burrow" challenges. The redesigned website, launched April 1, has received approximately 41,000 unique visitors and nearly 50,000 visits, while a social-media feed and community-science page were added in May and June.

Trail steward reporting has been streamlined through a Google Form, resulting in 189 reports representing 539 hours. Hellhole Trail near Kayenta has been the most frequently reported trail, with off-leash dogs and off-trail recreation being the most common violations. Three new steward applicants have been received, additional recruitment is planned, and long-time steward Larry Cazier is retiring and will be recognized at the trail steward dinner. Jason noted that the Reserve access point off 600 North in Hurricane receives more visitation than the Reserve's planned sites for which counts are available.

Scott also reported on a successful Give Your Land a Hand cleanup at Garth Rocks and noted that St. George City is considering working with the local recreation community to formalize the area with parking, interpretive signs, and cultural-resource information.

The committee discussed expanding outreach concerning the California condor. Scott characterized the condor conservation effort as an important example of

successful conservation that deserves greater public visibility. Kevin requested that Danielle Finlayson, a DWR conservation biologist, be involved because of her interest in condors and related lead-free ammunition outreach. George also suggested involving Amanda Holland, and the group agreed to include both individuals in development of the display.

5. UTILITY AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

a. Middleton waterline break

Cameron reported on an emergency water-line repair in Middleton. Mike monitored the work and ensured that personnel followed tortoise-training requirements. No impacts to desert tortoises were identified.

b. Water tank on Cottonwood Road

A water tank project south of the Reserve on Cottonwood Road remains under construction. It is fenced to exclude tortoises.

c. TDS line repair near Pioneer Park

A TDS line repair north of Pioneer Park is being coordinated with BLM and has been deferred to the final active season, likely for winter work.

d. Other utility projects

Jason reported that an expansion of the power station on Turkey Farm Road is forthcoming, along with a maintenance project involving Rocky Mountain Power for which required stipulations are being coordinated with John Kellam.

6. SURVEYS AND CLEARANCES

a. Long Valley

During UDOT right-of-way work, HCP staff discovered damaged fencing between BLM and private property and observed tortoise tracks passing beneath the fence. With landowner permission, the area was resurveyed, resulting in the removal of ten tortoises—three adults and seven juveniles or hatchlings—from property undergoing development. Staff believe additional hatchlings may remain and plan to return for further surveys when conditions cool. Members discussed nearby raven and red-tailed hawk activity as a possible factor affecting hatchling tortoises in that area.

b. Zone 6 area (scheduled for Aug-Oct)

Cameron also reported a major fall clearance effort planned for private properties east of Zone 6. Fence plans are being coordinated with developers, including DeVario and Quality Excavation, and tortoise removal will begin after fencing is completed.

7. OTHER REPORTS & BUSINESS

a. Update on wildfires in the Reserve – County / BLM

Cameron reported two fires in the Reserve. The July 12th fire burned approximately 73 acres south of the T-Bone and west of Cottonwood Road. The fire was primarily a lower-intensity grass fire, although several areas burned hotter. At least three tortoise mortalities were determined to be associated with the fire, while other carcasses found in the area predated the fire and were likely related to drought. A final report is being prepared by DWR and will be included in the annual report. Cameron clarified that the fire occurred in an area that had not previously burned, contrary to reports that it was within an old burn scar. The ignition was determined to be human-caused, although the specific source has not been confirmed; fireworks and a utility line have both been discussed as possibilities. The second fire, on July 19th, was apparently caused by lightning, burned approximately eight acres, and resulted in no observed tortoise impacts.

b. Recission of “harm” definition under the Endangered Species Act - FWS

George provided an update on the federal removal of the regulatory definition of “harm” under the Endangered Species Act. He explained that the final rule removes the regulatory definition because the agency determined that its treatment of significant habitat modification or degradation was duplicative of the statutory definition of take. The rule was expected to become effective in mid-September, although litigation and a potential stay were anticipated. George stated that the change would not eliminate Section 7 consultation requirements or affect critical habitat designations, but could affect circumstances in which habitat is modified when animals are not present. He explained that the practical implications could be more significant for Section 10 and habitat conservation plans involving suitable but unoccupied habitat. For the Reserve’s tortoise program, he advised that the change is not retroactive and that, because tortoises can be difficult to detect, staff should continue to exercise caution unless they can establish that tortoises are absent. Cameron and Kevin confirmed that the approved tortoise permit and existing clearance practices would not be changed as a result of the rule.

c. TC report – Mike Schijf

Mike then presented the HCP Technical Committee report from June 10th concerning conservation options for habitat islands and fragmented tortoise

populations. The assignment arose after damaged fencing at Long Valley allowed tortoises to enter adjacent private property. The Technical Committee is evaluating six isolated habitat areas and considering appropriate management approaches, including thresholds for viable populations, removal and translocation where warranted, fencing or culverts, additional studies, and any necessary permitting. DWR and Fish and Wildlife Service representatives participated in the discussion. A draft matrix with additional information on each isolated population will be presented at the Technical Committee's August meeting. Members discussed establishing a deadline to prevent the issue from remaining unresolved. The committee agreed to wait until after the August meeting to assess progress and then establish or reaffirm a deadline, with the end of the year identified as an appropriate target for completing a recommendation to the HCAC.

d. Land acquisition updates – County / BLM / FWS

Jason reported that an appraisal for the Doyle parcel has been completed, but available funds are insufficient to acquire the entire parcel. The appraisal was being provided to the private landowner for review, while additional funding is being sought to close the gap and acquire the entire parcel in one transaction. Jason explained that new processes could cause delays and that updated letters of support from PLPCO and/or the county might be requested. The preferred outcome is to secure sufficient funding to complete the acquisition, although alternatives could include a landowner donation if additional funds cannot be obtained. Jason explained that the appraisal amount can be locked in beyond the normal one-year period if both parties agree in writing. A new BLM realty employee, Erica Lopez, will begin Monday as a legal examiner and will receive mentoring as she develops experience with realty responsibilities.

George also reported that the \$6.5 million ESA Section 6 HCP land-acquisition grant had been approved, and DWR staff will begin implementation. Cameron noted that the Sullivan parcel had been a primary target for those funds and that staff will evaluate how the grant affects acquisition opportunities.

e. HCP Administrator's Report

1. Zone 6 Fence Agreements

Cameron reported that fence agreements are being finalized in Zone 6 to facilitate tortoise removal from private property. One agreement has been completed and fencing is under construction, while negotiations continue with DeVario on another agreement.

2. Central Valley Preserve

Cameron reported habitat impacts at Central Valley Preserve where ATVs appeared to have breached fencing. Law enforcement and field staff responded and assisted TLA with addressing the issue. Cameron recommended that the committee meet to discuss Central Valley Preserve and consider accelerating its preservation so that future management responsibilities could be transferred from TLA.

3. Status of Northern Corridor / Zone 6

Cameron reviewed the schedule for Northern Corridor litigation. The plaintiff's summary judgment motion and opening brief are due August 21, followed by defendant and intervener filings through October 19. No hearing date had been established, and a decision was anticipated toward the end of the year. The identified interveners are the county, UDOT, and the state. Jason additionally reported that consultation for the Northern Corridor historic-properties treatment plan has begun and that a draft plan will be developed.

8. PUBLIC COMMENT

This item is reserved for items not listed on this agenda. No action may be taken on a matter raised under this agenda item (three minutes per person).

During public comment, Gary Webster of Senator Lee's office requested that Sam Harvey, Outreach Coordinator for Celeste Malloy, be added to future meeting notifications because he was unable to attend.

9. MEMBER REPORTS & REQUEST FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

None.

10. ADJOURN

MOTION by: Kevin Bunnell
Seconded by: Jason West
Discussion: To adjourn the meeting.
Vote was taken: All voted aye.
Motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:55 p.m.
Minutes prepared by Randee Sanders.