

Desert Dispatch

# Army moves ahead with tortoise transfer

By Jason Smith, staff writer

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MINNEOLA ROAD - Number 2010 pulled his head and feet into his shell as he was lifted out of the plastic storage container, weighed and placed under a creosote bush.

The six-and-a-half pound desert tortoise hid under the bush, spending his Friday morning evaluating his new habitat, a plot of desert land 10 miles south of his previous home in the middle of Fort Irwin's future training ground. After a few moments in the shade, 2010's head protruded out and he ambled into the sunlight to munch on some nearby wildflowers.

William Boarman, the chief scientist working on the Army's \$8.5 million contract to eventually move 764 tortoises from Fort Irwin, said that 2010 and 36 other tortoises moved on Friday will take some time adjusting to their new homes.

"Sometimes they move right away, sometimes they sit for an hour or two," he said.

Contractor ITS, Fort Irwin officials and researchers from the United States Geological Survey are in the second year of the five-year effort to relocate, conserve and study the animals.

As part of the move, tortoises are transported by a helicopter in FAA-approved plastic bins and released one at a time into a series of habitats. Before releasing them into the wild, biologists check the tortoises' radio transmitters, small boxy units affixed with epoxy onto the reptiles' shells. The transmitters will allow the tortoises to be tracked from miles away, enabling biologists to research how tortoises adapt to the relocation and interact with tortoises already living on the land, Boarman said. Some of the tortoises were moved into man-made burrows and others were left to redig their own homes.

Kristen Berry, a wildlife biologist from the USGS, said that although thousands of desert tortoises have been moved through other projects, she believes Fort Irwin's effort is one of the largest tortoise relocation efforts attempted.

"We're moving an entire population," she said.

Berry, who began studying the reptiles in 1971 when the populations were in decline, said that she's happy to have the opportunity to conduct research about how disease spreads among the reptiles. In addition to disease, the tortoises face a human threat.

"There's an Asian turtle trade that's a problem, and there's been cases of poaching the West Mojave," she said.

She said that she's heard cases of humans vandalizing and even sometimes shooting the tortoises but hopes that the radio tracking will allow officials to prevent any problems.

Boarman said that the plots of land the tortoises are being moved to is pretty typical habitat for the animals.

"There are better places where tortoises live; there are worse places where tortoises live," he said. "There's not a lot known that makes really good tortoise habitat."

Although some environmental groups say the move will harm the endangered reptiles, Boarman said he thinks they'll do fine in their new homes.

Ileene Anderson, staff biologist from the Center for Biological Diversity, said that her group is worried the relocated tortoises, while already given blood tests and medical care, may be in danger in their new homes.

"They're moving them into an area with animals that are known to have disease," she said. "There's going to be a lot of movement among tortoise populations that could be sick."

She said her group, which has declared its intent to sue the Army to stop the move, would prefer to see more protections for the tortoises in their new habitat, such as a ban on off-highway vehicle use and fewer roads.

### **Did you know?**

During their helicopter ride, some tortoises urinated in their containers due to fright of flight. Before releasing them into the wild, biologists have to clean off the tortoises so that the reptiles' distinctive smell is not detected by coyotes and other predators.

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William Boarman, chief scientist for the translocation of desert tortoises from Fort Irwin to a new desert habitat, holds a tortoise Friday at the relocation site.

Photo by Aileen Humphreys

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Desert tortoise No. 4487 crawls inside its tub Friday at a relocation site near Yermo. The tortoise and hundreds of others are being moved from Fort Irwin by helicopter to make way for a base expansion.  
Photo by Aileen Humphreys

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KABC-TV reporter Rob McMillan watches desert tortoise No. 4058 as he prepares for a shot about tortoise relocation Friday near Yermo.  
Photo by Aileen Humphreys