

## Environmental groups sue to stop Fort Irwin tortoise relocation

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July 2, 2008 - 4:26PM

By [Abby Sewell](#), staff writer

A pair of environmental groups filed a federal lawsuit in an attempt to stop the relocation of desert tortoises from Fort Irwin.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Desert Survivors filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the Department of the Army Wednesday, alleging that the agencies did not conduct an extensive enough environmental review before relocating the tortoises and failed to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when the tortoises did not thrive in their new habitat.

Congress authorized Fort Irwin to expand in 2001, leading to the relocation of about 770 tortoises from the southern expansion area in the spring of 2008. The tortoises were moved from newly acquired Fort Irwin land slated for training use to unoccupied public land.

The desert tortoise is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Moving the tortoises requires handlers to wear gloves to avoid spreading disease. The animals also tend to urinate while being handled, leading them to potentially become dehydrated, according to Desert Tortoise Council handling guidelines.

The Center for Biological Diversity claims that in the relocation, healthy tortoises were mixed with diseased populations and that the new habitat is inferior because of its proximity to roads and off-road vehicle use. Coyotes killed more than 20 tortoises within a few days, the lawsuit states.

Mickey Quillman, chief of resources at the BLM's Barstow Field Office, had not seen the lawsuit and could not comment on the specific allegations. He said, however, that Fort Irwin had conducted disease evaluation of all tortoises they could locate at Fort Irwin, as well as in the relocation area, and diseased tortoises were quarantined. Biologists have monitored the tortoises throughout the relocation process, he said.

"I think the team the Army assembled did a very good job in evaluating the habitat where they were moving the tortoises," he said.

A second round of relocations will be conducted once Fort Irwin is able to find suitable habitat near the western expansion area, he said, probably in the spring of 2009.

Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the aim of the lawsuit is to stop a second round of tortoise relocations until Fort Irwin creates better conditions for the transplanted tortoises. Some of the tortoises should remain at Fort Irwin, in the areas not slated for tank training, she said.

"Is it really necessary to even move all these tortoises?" Anderson said. "Are there options for these animals to stay in their home burrows?"

Among other measures, she said the Army should build a temporary fence around the new tortoise habitat to keep predators out and prevent the tortoises from trying to return to their former habitat while they adjust to their new conditions.

“We feel that they did not use all of the best available science with regard to implementing the transfer plan,” she said.

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