



## 4. ENDANGERED SPECIES:

### New desert tortoise recovery plan weaker than original, critics say (08/07/2008)

April Reese, *Land Letter* Western reporter

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's new recovery plan for the threatened desert tortoise, unveiled earlier this week, is either an innovative strategy for endangered species conservation or a watered-down version of the original plan, depending on whom you ask.

The revised plan, officially announced in the Aug. 4 edition of the [Federal Register](#), would focus on collaboration with various stakeholders. The document also calls for augmenting depleted populations and would take an adaptive management approach to recovery, allowing managers to fine tune recovery strategies based on their effectiveness.

"It's really focused a lot more on implementation, coordination of actions and documentation of actions," said Bob Williams, field supervisor for FWS's Nevada office. The success of the revised plan will "rely heavily" upon the involvement of stakeholders, he added.



The Mojave population of the tortoise was listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1990. Photo courtesy of FWS.

Environmental groups are far less sanguine about the new plan. [Ileene Anderson](#), a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, [said the revision actually abandons strategies in the old plan that would put the desert tortoise on the path to recovery.](#)

For example, the original plan, issued in 1994, called for phasing out grazing in tortoise habitat, but the new plan does not, she said. And while the original recovery strategy emphasized on-the-ground conservation, the updated version is "vague" on concrete actions, she added.

["The '94 plan was written by scientists," Anderson said. "This plan was written by federal bureaucrats. They've simply rewritten the original plan so that it is much less rigorous."](#)

[Tortoise recovery would be better served by the original plan, which was never fully implemented, Anderson added \(\*Land Letter\*, Oct. 25, 2007\).](#)

But Williams said the new plan acknowledges that the management prescriptions in the original document are still needed and is simply designed to improve implementation through the creation of new partnerships. FWS will form "recovery implementation teams" for each management area that will include federal land managers, biologists, state officials and local stakeholders who ask to participate, which could include members of off-highway vehicle organizations, environmental groups and local government entities, he said.

"The folks who are critical of the plan believe in the old way of doing business, with FWS dictating and mandating recovery, but that doesn't work," he said. "I've been doing this for 34 years, and if you don't get buy-in from local people, you end up in court."

### A long path toward tortoise protection

Indeed, the desert tortoise has been the subject of several court battles, the latest of which involves federal scientists moving hundreds of tortoises to make way for the expansion of military exercises at the Fort Irwin Army base in California. Earlier this month, the center filed suit over the relocation in April of 770 tortoises to a dozen locations on BLM land to accommodate new tank training exercises. [Anderson said the relocation, which will eventually involve moving a total of almost 2,000 tortoises, has already resulted in increased predation by coyotes.](#)

In an unusual move, FWS recruited a conflict resolution facilitator to help come up with a collaborative strategy to recover the tortoise. The agency has taken that approach with two other species, the Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep and the spotted owl, but this is the first time the agency has used the approach for a species with such a large range, Williams said.

#### A 2004 [assessment](#)

of the original plan by a group of agency biologists and university researchers concluded that the document was "fundamentally strong" but did not lead to improvements in the tortoise's recovery status.

"The recovery prescriptions of the original recovery plan were only partially implemented and, as implemented, the recovery plan neither appears to be leading to desert tortoise recovery, nor is it likely to do so," the assessment concluded.

FWS acknowledged in the *Federal Register*

notice that the main threats to the tortoise "continue to affect the species." Those include primarily human land uses, ranging from habitat loss and fragmentation from urban development to off-highway vehicle use, roads, mining and military exercises. Disease and an increase in wildfires from the spread of invasive plants in the Mojave Desert have also contributed to the decline, according to FWS.

Studies in 2004 and 2005 suggest that population declines continue, particularly in the western portion of the tortoise's range. The desert tortoise is found in parts of the Mojave Desert of Arizona, Southern California, southern Nevada -- including the fast-growing Las Vegas area -- and southwestern Utah.

The plan is open for public comment for the next 90 days.

[Click here](#) to read the draft plan.

[Click here](#) to read the *Federal Register* notice on the draft plan.

*April Reese writes from Santa Fe, N.M.*

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