

Army, Bureau of Land Management sued over tortoise relocations

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Two environmental groups filed a federal lawsuit Wednesday against the Army, alleging it moved more than 700 desert tortoises to habitat that is lower quality and with pockets of disease-ridden tortoises that already live there.

The goal of the lawsuit by the Center for Biological Diversity and Desert Survivors is to make sure the new habitat for the reptile is managed as a reserve and that subsequent relocations from the National Training Center at Fort Irwin are done with more study, said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. The lawsuit was filed in San Francisco.

The desert tortoise is listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Endangered Species Act.

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Biologist Colin Spake, of San Francisco, checks his notes before releasing tortoises in the Mojave Desert.

John Wagstaffe, an Army spokesman, said he couldn't confirm the Army was sued. But he said the Army's relocation effort of 770 tortoises last spring was the largest in California. It was part of an \$8.5 million effort to expand Fort Irwin while dealing with the species protected by both state and federal governments.

Additional tortoises are expected to be moved when the Army expands Fort Irwin.

Of those moved last spring south of Fort Irwin, about a dozen were killed within a couple of weeks, possibly by coyotes, the lawsuit said.

"We are going to learn stuff that we didn't know and we'll learn how to translocate better," Wagstaffe said. He also said that any tortoises found to have diseases were placed in pens on Fort Irwin prior to the relocation.

The lawsuit also named the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which oversees some of the land where the tortoises were moved, alleging it failed to conduct environmental reviews of the relocation. Stephen Razo, a BLM spokesman, said he couldn't comment on the lawsuit because the agency hasn't seen it.

Anderson said the agency should ban off-roading and treat the area as a tortoise reserve.

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