



DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

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12 February 2016

Via email only

Ms. Jennifer Fox, Ecologist
Bureau of Land Management
Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument
345 East Riverside Drive
St. George, Utah 84790

RE: Pakoon Springs Public Use Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-AZ-A030-2016-0004-EA)

Dear Ms. Fox,

The Desert Tortoise Council (Council) is a non-profit organization comprised of hundreds of professionals and laypersons who share a common concern for wild desert tortoises and a commitment to advancing the public's understanding of this species. Established in 1975 to promote conservation of tortoises in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico, the Council regularly provides information to individuals, organizations and regulatory agencies on matters potentially affecting the desert tortoise within its geographic range.

We received the public notice, dated 13 January 2016, from a third party on 19 January 2016 regarding the Pakoon Springs Public Use Environmental Assessment (Draft EA), which is located in Mohave County, Arizona. The notice indicates that the "purpose of the proposed action is to relocate visitor information signage, increase protection of the springs through additional fencing, and allow for future research activities. The proposed action includes installation of a new parking area (approx. 0.10 acre), trail, signage, and pass through gates, and removal/rehabilitation of the existing parking area (approx. 0.15 acre)...Installation of a 'bat pond' is proposed to maintain the shallow open water needed for use by bats."

The notice further indicates "The proposal includes design features to mitigate impacts to Mojave desert tortoise a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The proposal design features would be consistent with the Revised Recovery Plan for the Mojave Population of the Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*).” Finally, we understand that the 30-day public scoping period ends on 12 February 2016.

1. We ask that you reconsider the need for the bat pond, or use a design that does not allow access by ravens (*Corvus corax*) and coyotes (*Canis latrans*), as it will provide another source of anthropogenic water to these two confirmed subsidized predators of desert tortoises. Providing these predators with more subsidies will serve to increase their population sizes, and consequently, their predation rates on tortoises in the area. In recognition of the effect of subsidized predators on desert tortoise populations and the need to manage them, the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument Plan (BLM and NPS 2008) prohibits the subsidy of these predators in desert tortoise habitat.

We believe the proposed bat pond would be a violation of the National Park Service's (NPS) management Plan for the area; is not consistent with the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) land use plan for the same area; is inconsistent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS 2011) Revised Recovery Plan for the Mojave Population of the Desert Tortoise, which also calls for management of subsidized predators through management of anthropogenic sources of water; and is directly in contrast to the goals of your project to "mitigate impacts to the Mojave Desert tortoise." We believe that the installation of the bat pond would be a significant impact to desert tortoise populations in the area and would be a violation of BLM, NPS, and USFWS Plans for the area, so we ask that you reconsider the need for the bat pond, or use a design that does not allow access by ravens and coyotes.

2. It will help us greatly in our eventual review if the Draft EA describes why these modifications are necessary, particularly as they relate to desert tortoises and their habitats. For example, do we know current densities of desert tortoises in the vicinity of the existing facilities and the new location(s)? Will there be increased, decreased, or neutral impacts to tortoises as a result of the proposed action? We expect that the BLM will require protocol tortoise surveys of new facilities areas and the results of those surveys will be included in the Draft EA.

3. In the Draft EA, please indicate pertinent data such as frequency of visitors and existing educational signage, particularly as they pertain to protection of tortoises. Please identify any known and anticipated impacts to desert tortoise by (a) facilities construction and maintenance, (b) visitor use, and (c) potential subsidization of ravens and coyotes resulting from visitor use of existing and anticipated facilities. How will these impacts be mitigated in terms of (a) minimizing impacts during construction and maintenance, (b) educating visitors on the plight of the tortoise and precautions to avoid impacts, and (c) monitoring and remediation if tortoise predation increases as a result of the proposed action?

4. We note that the proposed action will include research projects. Are any of these research projects related to desert tortoises? Please be sure to indicate the full range of proposed research activities in the Draft EA.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide scoping comments on this project. We ask that the Desert Tortoise Council be considered an Affected Party for this and other projects on BLM-administered lands that may affect tortoises. We look forward to reviewing and commenting on the Draft EA when published.

Regards,



Edward L., LaRue, Jr., M.S.

Desert Tortoise Council, Ecosystems Advisory Committee, Chairperson

Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service. 2008. Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument Resource Management Plan/General Management Plan (RMP/GMP). Bureau of Land Management, St George, UT.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Revised recovery plan for the Mojave population of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pacific Southwest Region, Sacramento, California. 222 pp.