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DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

NEWSLETTER

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The Desert's Growing Problem: Illegal Cannabis Grow Farms

I had the opportunity to ask Sam Easley of <u>Transition Habitat Conservancy</u> (THC) some questions about the emerging threat of illegal cannabis grows via Google Docs this past summer. Here are excerpts from our discussion.

How did you - personally and/or professionally - come to care about this issue?

I have been monitoring desert lands for management issues as a volunteer, a BLM intern, and as an employee of Transition Habitat Conservancy for approximately eight years now. I had grown accustomed to the typical disturbances from human activities in the desert and knew how to respond with graffiti removal, trash cleanups, restoration plans, grant proposals, etc.

While monitoring land in late 2020, however, I came across this new management issue that far exceeded any others in scale and severity. These cannabis grow operations seemed to move in overnight while we were all stuck in our homes early during the Covid-19 pandemic. The impacts associated with these facilities were massive and they were right in my organization's backyard. We are unaware of any direct impacts to our properties to date, but we have observed significant trash, dumped chemicals, etc. that are likely to affect our lands due to the proximity of these grows.

What kind of property does Transition Habitat Conservancy target for acquisition, and for what purpose(s)?



A cannabis grow house in a Desert Wildlife Management Area. Photo courtesy of Sam Easley.

Have Transition Habitat Conservancy lands been affected by the illegal cultivation problem, either directly or peripherally?

Transition Habitat Conservancy (THC) acquires land for habitat conservation for a number of species. In this region, most of

our lands are specifically managed for Mohave Ground Squirrel and Desert Tortoise. We do a variety of research and restoration projects on our land and Bureau of Land Management public lands to protect these species. We focus on key

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to Issue 46, Volume 2 of the Desert Tortoise Council Newsletter.

In this winter solstice issue, you'll find articles about illegal cannabis grow operations in our deserts, the extraordinary legacy of one of the most perseverant desert tortoise advocates, the sharing of important grant announcements (with nearing application deadlines!), and more.

A feature on the Council's recent trip to the Turtle Survival Alliance Symposium and an update on a California Endangered Species Act listing are also included.

This issue spotlights Board Member Michael Vamstad, Wildlife Biologist at Joshua Tree National Park and Chairperson of the Council's *ad hoc* Mexican Tortoise Coordination Committee.

To conclude our final issue of 2022, our back page announcements detail upcoming and recent events, such as a call for 2023 Symposium sponsors and a reminder to select Desert Tortoise Council Inc. as your AmazonSmile charity.

As always, follow us on social media to stay up to date on all things

desert tortoise, including Council actions, courses offered, annual symposia, recovery efforts, and more.

We hope to see you in St. George this February!

Cheers,

Halle

Halle Kohn
newsletter@deserttortoise.org



I'm the one on the right.

Linda Allison: A Powerful Legacy

By The Desert Tortoise Council's Board of Directors

During this 47th Year of the Desert Tortoise Council, we are pleased to honor Linda Allison with the "Power of Persistence Award." This is the first year the award is given by the Council and recognizes the oftenoverlooked efforts of an individual, organization, or agency that, due to their determination, has successfully navigated regulatory, bureaucratic, or political processes to accomplish important con-

servation decisions or actions for the tortoise.

Linda was selected for this award by the Council's Awards Committee for the following outstanding achievements that have affected change within existing bureaucratic processes:

 Persistence encapsulates what is required to manage the range-wide monitoring program for recovery of the desert tortoise.

- As the Desert Tortoise
 Monitoring Coordinator for
 the USFWS Desert Tortoise
 Recovery Office, Linda
 managed the range-wide
 monitoring program since
 2006. Managing this program required a heroic effort to successfully complete
 15 years of field surveys
 across 17 or more monitoring strata in four states.
- People who have worked for, or been contracted by, the federal government will understand just how "heroic" Linda's efforts have been. She received and processed funding from multiple outside agencies, usually at the last minute; at that last minute adapted the annual survey effort to the available funds and applied the funds via increasingly arcane grant and contracting systems to multiple cooperative agreements; secured separate permits from multiple land management agen-

cies, via different bureaucratic processes for the same agencies that paid to do the actual work; collaborated with the field teams to train dozens of surveyors, coordinate about withinseason progress.

- She then processed and conducted quality checks of the data and analyzed the
- By providing reports to multiple agencies, the field season of data was successfully completed each year for 15 years.
- As a result, Linda's efforts have resulted in the first range-wide trend estimation for the Mojave desert tortoise, covering the years 2004-2014, summarized first in a 2015 report and published in 2018 with Ann McLuckie.
- A new range-wide analysis is forthcoming that will cover 2001 through 2021. While



Linda watching a desert tortoise. Photo courtesy of Kristen Hayes.

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The Desert's Growing Problem (continued)

parcels with quality habitat to help us manage the legal route system through this region for public enjoyment and conserva-

THC lands have been peripherally affected by these operations that border our land. Windblown trash from plastic greenhouses litter the landscape and we are worried about what sort of chemicals may be leaching into the groundwater in this sensitive ecosystem. Many acres of habitat are also being lost due to the grading and clearing of these properties. This is removing seed banks and covering burrows of wildlife that may never return to these barren parcels.

How would you describe the impacts that these operations have on the desert environment/ecosystem they're situated in (what are the impacts and at what scale)?

Critical desert habitat is being irreparably destroyed. We are not opposed to all development, but we do feel that it needs to be done responsibly with appropriate mitigation. The issue is not with the specific crop being grown, but with the impacts from unpermitted and unregulated operations.

There has been no consideration long term effects associated with enforcement are doing their best, of the damaging effects from blowing dust, dumped chemicals, and unsustainable water use. Wells are being dug without permits, access roads are being cut through pristine desert, vegetation is being removed, and underground burrows are being crushed.

What are some specific, and potential, impacts to tortoises? Are these concerns short-term or long-term?

When I went out to investigate one grow in particular, I found three of the largest adult tortoises that I have seen in eight years of regular field work in this area. They were all within 20 meters of each other and less than a mile from this massive operation that had bladed that 40-acre parcel from corner to corner. It's hard to imagine that tortoise burrows weren't crushed and buried (with tortoises inside) when that heavy machinery cleared the parcel. New roads are being cut into the land and more vehicles are traveling in this region, including large water trucks or flatbeds carrying tanks of water. These vehicles speed down newly bladed roads, kicking up dust, and running over at least one tortoise that we have found in the area. We also fear

many of the chemicals used at these operations.

What is being done to combat this problem? Can individuals help, and what should we do if we see a place like this?

Law enforcement and many state agencies are cooperating to tackle this relatively new problem. This is something that folks in Northern California have made headway on, and it could explain the influx into our Southern California deserts as an Unfortunately, I don't think that alternative. This truly feels like a modern day gold rush. Someone developed a model and others rapidly moved to the area to duplicate it. Fines and penalties are minimal and land is cheap so they are operating brazenly in the public view.

Individuals should stay far away from any of these grows. Our staff has been followed and intimidated by workers on site while visiting our adjacent lands and we are aware of violent incidents at some locations. We appreciate people reporting any of these operations that they see in the high desert, especially in San Bernardino County as they are all illegal outside of the city of Adelanto. More attention is being paid to this issue and law

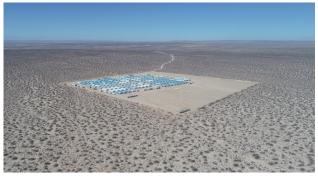
but we are dealing with well over 1,000 illegal grows in San Bernardino County alone and the penalties are not strict enough to keep perpetrators from starting their operations up again. The public can report using <u>CalTIP</u> or by calling 1-888-334-2258.

Can the affected desert landscape be restored? What sort of efforts can be/are being made, and how long will ecosystem recovery take?

these damaged parcels will ever look the same, especially not in our lifetimes. Desert ecosystems take decades or more to restore due to the lack of annual rain, and these environments are becoming harsher places to live as our climate changes. I am not hopeless that we could create new restoration techniques in the future, but I think it is unrealistic to imagine us "fixing" these properties anytime soon. They are now effectively devoid of life, but that doesn't mean that they are entirely useless. There is a lot of trash that will need to be cleaned up whenever these sites are safe to return to. After that, we will need to find a use for the land. Some could be used for research to test various restoration methods and assess what interventions we could make to accelerate natural processes in the environment. Some parcels could become educational centers, campsites or staging areas for folks who come to the Mojave Desert for recrea-

You can check out the work that THC is doing and learn how to contribute to their mission by visiting their website and finding them on social media.





Left: Aerial image of a forty-acre illegal cannabis grow operation in the Fremont-Kramer subregion Right: Heavy equipment utilized by grow operations to clear a property corner-to-corner Photos provided by Sam Easley

Desert Tortoise Council Attends 2022 Symposium on Conservation and Biology for Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles



Tucson during monsoon season is a wonderous place. One moment, you can be wandering up a path beside a quaint desert stream: finding pink blooms atop Fishhook Pincushion Cactus; watching Organ Pipe Cacti sending long reaching, open arms up to the sky; and squinting past sun rays poking through thorny Ironwood branches. It might be sunny and hot, with dark, looming cumulonimbus clouds over the eastern mountains. The air would start to feel

heavier and heavier with humidity.

The next moment, lightning beams across the horizon and thunder shakes the ground underfoot. Water rains down and accumulates into generous rivers. Then, in a blink, the storm subsides as quickly as it came.

In the equally chaotic and beautiful environment that is Tucson, Arizona, herpetologists and turtle enthusiasts came together for the first in-

person conference they had been to in years. The 20th Annual Symposium on the Conservation and Biology of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles was held from August 7th through the 11th by the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) and IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG) at Loews Ventana Canyon Resort. As a Silver Sponsor of the symposium, Desert Tortoise Council was reserved two vending tables and registrations. Desert Tortoise Council Board Members Joe Probst and Halle Kohn made the trek from the Mojave and Colorado deserts (respectively) out to the lush Sonoran one, having volunteered to manage the Council's vendor tables at the event. Other Council Board Members, including Cristina Jones, Maggie Fusari, and Bruce Palmer, were also present. Cristina Jones, a member of TSA's Symposium Planning Committee, served as a Program Co-Chair of the symposium. Maggie Fusari is a member

of the Tucson Herpetological Society Board of Directors, and she was managing their vendor table alongside other volunteers.

The symposium felt like how a tortoise might feel when waking from brumation, having both an electric curiosity and an obligatory hesitancy whilst emerging from the safety of the burrow (or the quarantine). More than anything, the warm feeling of re-affirmed community was evident as folks met face-to-face with friends and colleagues that they hadn't seen in-person for a couple revolutions around the sun.

Of course, it is nearly impossible to keep herpetologists from herping (try as Loews Ventana Canyon Resort might – oh, wait, there are signs that say the trails close at dusk?). There were two opportunities to attend a field trip: one, the Arizona–Sonora Desert Museum, and two, Sabino Canyon with Tucson Herpetological Society.



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Desert Tortoise Council Attends 2022 Symposium on Conservation and Biology for Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles (continued)

The presentations on recent chelonian research spanned across a broad range of topics and species, with some permeating perceived lines between biological and cultural. One of this year's plenary addresses was presented by Robert Villa, who discussed Bio-cultural Aspects of Sonoran Cheloni-

Finally, Desert Tortoise Council's vendor table, pictured right, was a turtle total success with \$1,428 worth of swag sold to 71 symposium registrants. Council logo t-shirts were the most popular merchandise sold, with 60 sales and \$900 from t-shirts alone.



The Desert Tortoise Council is in the slow & steady process of creating an online store, but in the meantime, keep your eyes peeled for social media announcing events that include Council merchandise!

Update on Petition to List the Mojave Desert Tortoise as Endangered Under the California Endangered Species Act By Judy Hohman and Becky Jones

On October 14, 2020, the California Fish and Game Commission voted 4-0 to grant temporary endangered species status to the Mojave desert tortoise (Gopherus agassizii) when it agreed to consider it as a candidate for upgrading the status from threatened to endangered. This temporary designation to endangered was in response to a petition filed by the Defenders of Wildlife, the Desert Tortoise Council, and the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee. The groups argued that elevating the reptile's status under the California Endangered Species Act from threatened to

endangered could bolster efforts plete the status review within to "reverse the very real likelihood that the desert tortoise will nation, by October 2021 but become extinct in California." Endangered species have higher layed its preparation. In priority and funding for conservation measures such as habitat protection, recovery efforts, and mitigation measures to reduce the impacts of projects.

The decision by the Commission triggered the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to prepare a status review of the Mojave desert tortoise in California and provide it to the Commission for their final decision. The Department is to com-

a year of the temporary desig-Covid and other issues despring 2022, the Department solicited public comment regarding the ecology, biology, life history, distribution, abundance, threats and habitat that may be essential for the Mojave desert tortoise, and any recommendations for management. The Desert Tortoise Council provided comments to the Department in June 2022. We anticipate that status review may be

completed in winter of 2022-2023 or spring 2023.



Photo submitted by Ally Xiong; 2022 Desert Tortoise Symposium Photo Contest.

Course & Workshop Announcements

Introduction to the Mojave Desert Tortoise

By Dr. Margaret Fusari

The Desert Tortoise Council offered a combined introductory course this year (2022). Introduction to the Mojave Desert Tortoise was comprised of two main parts:

- 1. A two-day, online lecture series on the afternoon of Friday October 28 and the morning of Saturday October 29.
- 2. A one-day field workshop in Ridgecrest CA to be taken EI-THER Friday November 4 or Saturday November 5.

There was a brief, online quiz between the two offerings and an online evaluation after.

We are very excited about returning to a full course including both lectures and fieldwork. We are also happy to be able to update our course to a more accessible model combining online lectures and onsite fieldwork.

We would like to thank David Hedrick of Turtle Survival Alliance for supporting the Zoom platform and for all of our lecturers and field leaders, who work as volunteers so that you get a highquality course with a low fee.

Regarding future courses, we are aware that there might be a Covid resurgence and will be sure to prepare accordingly.

The Desert Tortoise Council's website is typically updated with new information about the upcoming annual course around summertime. The Introductory Course is consistently held in late

October or early November. Keep an eye on our website for information about the 2023 course.

Anyone with comments or questions can direct them to: intro-course@deserttortoise.org



Linda Allison: A Powerful Legacy (continued)

this program is literally a full -time job, Linda has also provided support for and designed other smaller-scale projects involving surveys and monitoring tortoises, in addition to other contributions with the Desert Tortoise Recovery Office.

Some of us have known Linda for two decades or more through



Linda investigating a desert tortoise burrow. Photo courtesy of Terry Christopher.

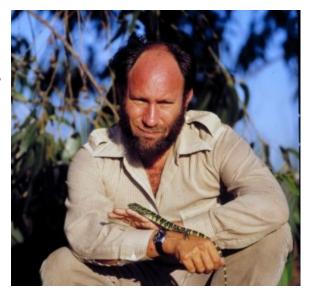
our association with the Desert Tortoise Council. We feel her loss very deeply. We knew Linda for her years of project design and protocols, research, monitoring, and reporting for rangewide monitoring of desert tortoises as part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Desert Tortoise Recovery Office. She stood out among many scientists and wildlife biologists for her professionalism, expertise in statistics, and perseverance in pursuing a very difficult task with so many time-sensitive deadlines and a requirement for consistency in high quality of field efforts. Many of us will remember her for decades into

the future for setting and pursuing the high standards essential for assessing status of the tortoise across the range. She leaves a powerful legacy behind, one that will be difficult to meet for those that follow. Members of the Desert Tortoise Council looked forward each winter to her reports at the annual symposia. The field workers, too, will think of her in late winter when plans are set for the spring field work, and while walking the transects. Linda will be in our memories for many years into the future. Her articles will be used and cited for much longer. We miss you, Linda, you were so very special.

Grant & Award Announcements

David J. Morafka Memorial Research Award Announcement

The Desert Tortoise Council is now accepting applications for the 2019 David J. Morafka Memorial Research Award. The award was established, with the aid of several donors, to help support research that contributes to the understanding, management and conservation of tortoises of the genus Gopherus (G. agassizii, G. morafkai, G. evgoodei, G. berlandieri, and G. flavomarginatus) in the southwestern United States and Mexico. Applicants must be associated with a recognized institution (e.g., university, museum, government agency, non-governmental organization) and may be graduate students, post-doctoral students, or



other researchers. Applications will be evaluated on the basis of the potential of the research to contribute to the biological knowledge of one or more of the above gopher tortoise species, and to their management and conservation. The \$2,500 award will be presented to the winning applicant at the Desert Tortoise Council's Annual Symposium in February 2023. Applications are due December 31st, 2022.

Please visit the Desert Tortoise Council website for full information about the award, as well as application procedures and documents.

Linda J. Allison Memorial Grant Award Announcement

The Desert Tortoise Council has established the Linda J. Allison Memorial Grant. Applications will be accepted for research that (1) investigates the demography of tortoises in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico (i.e., Gopherus agassizii, G. morafkai, G. evgoodei, G. berlandieri, and G.

flavomarginatus), (2) conducts robust statistical analysis/modeling of population data with quality control/validation, and (3) contributes to the understanding, management, and conservation of tortoises. The award amount is US \$2,500 and applications are due December 31st, 2022.



Photo of Linda Allison courtesy of Terry Christopher.

Glenn R. Stewart Student Travel

The Desert Tortoise Council is now accepting applications for the Glenn R. Stewart Student Travel Fund. This fund was established to support students working with North American *Gopherus* tor-



toises by assisting with their travel costs to attend and participate at the 2023 Desert Tortoise Council Symposium. The fund will support up to \$500 (each) in travel costs for up to two students. Applicants must be enrolled in a recognized educational institution and may be a high school, undergraduate, graduate, or post-doctoral student. The student applicant must be a member of the Desert Tortoise Council, must present an oral presentation or

poster at the 2019 Symposium. Applications are due December 31st, 2022.

Please visit the <u>Desert Tortoise Council website</u> for full information about the fund, as well as application procedures and documents.

For any specific questions about any of the available grants and awards, please reach out to our Grants Committee.

Board of Directors Spotlight

Michael Vamstad

Michael Vamstad grew up in a small farming community in southwestern Wisconsin where his love of the natural environment began with long walks and hunts in the woods. At an early age, his fascination with birds led to an interest in biology and eventually to a degree in field biology at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. After completing undergraduate studies, Michael began working on any bird job that he could find that provided a place to stay and some "walking around" money. For eight years he worked on many field research projects in California, Arizona, Rhode Island, Guam, and Baja California, México.

Currently, Michael is the Wildlife Ecologist at Joshua Tree National Park. He has been in this position since 2007, working on a large diversity of tasks and projects. These projects include working with the endangered desert tortoise, desert bighorn

sheep, climate change research, insect sampling, and the relocation of rattlesnakes when they decide that campsites and bathrooms are good places to hang out. Michael began his NPS career in 2004, when he accepted a Restoration Ecologist position at Joshua Tree National Park. He was tasked with coordinating restoration activities in the Park, including a project to transplant adult Joshua

Trees. Michael attended graduate school at the University of California, Riverside, while continuing his work there. In 2009, Michael received his Master's in Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology by completing a thesis on small mammal and vegetation responses to wildfire.

Michael speaks fluent Spanish, which he learned from working in Mexico, and this led to a detail to Peru in 2016 to work as an Embassy Science Fellow. This fellowship was sponsored by the Department of State to assist the Peruvian Servicio Nacional de Áreas

Naturales Protegidas por el Estado - SERNANP (National Service of Natural Protected Areas) with the review and management of scientific research conducted in natural protected areas. The effort eventually led to the creation of a Peruvian Research Guide that was published in Spanish and English.

Early on in his time at Joshua Tree National Park, Michael became aware that the desert tortoise was the primary concern for the Park*. For many years he attended Desert Tortoise Council symposiums and workshops to network with colleagues and form conservation partnerships. In 2018, Michael decided that he would follow the *Editor's note: in case you advice of another board member and ask to be part of the Desert Tortoise Council board. Soon after being accepted as a board member, Michael formed a committee to develop and assist con-



Michael replaces a radio transmitter on a tortoise that NPS has been tracking for 8 years

servation and research of desert tortoises in Mexico.

missed it, you can find great educational content featuring Michael that was released earlier this year by KTLA News and Joshua Tree National Park.

Join Us in St. George, Utah, for the 2023 Desert Tortoise Council Symposium

The Desert Tortoise Council is pleased to announce registration is now open for the 48th Annual Meeting and Symposium, which will be a hybrid event (both in-person and virtual attendance options) held at the Dixie Center in St. George, Utah, between February 22 and 25, 2023. On February 22nd, the Council will offer field trips to Utah's beautiful redrock country and elsewhere.

Also on February 22nd, SNEI will again sponsor a preconference mixer to welcome everyone back to an in-person event. The technical meeting, which will be presented on February 23, 24, and 25, will include a program that will be exciting, challenging, and full of new information!

To learn about sponsorship opportunities, see the back page announcements.



A desert tortoise spotted in the Red Cliffs Natural Conservation Area. Photo by Mary Lane Poe.

Back Page Announcements

Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability

This year, a far-reaching study was published that echoes the urgency of conservationists warning about the outcomes of climate change. In chapter 3 (Deserts, Semiarid Areas and Desertification) of IPCC's publiis mentioned specifically as the

decline of the species reflects the significance of human impactscation, the Mojave desert tortoise such as climate change-wreaking havoc on biodiversity.

IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press.



Support Desert Tortoise Council Through AmazonSmile

As you finish up your holiday shopping for the season, please consider selecting Desert Tortoise Council as your charity organization on AmazonSmile.

AmazonSmile is a simple way for you to support your favorite charitable organization every time you shop, at no

cost to you. AmazonSmile is available at

smile.amazon.com on your web browser and can be activated in the Amazon Shopping app for iOS and Android phones.

When you shop with AmazonSmile, you'll find the exact same prices and selection as

Amazon.com, with the added benefit that AmazonSmile will donate 0.5% of your eligible purchases to the charitable organization of your choice.

On your first visit to AmazonSmile, you will be prompted to select a charitable organization to receive donations from your future eligible AmazonSmile purchases. Simply search for Desert Tortoise Council Inc. You can also select "Change your charity" at any



Follow the Desert Tortoise Council:



Council Mission

The Desert Tortoise Council was established in 1975 to promote conservation of the desert tortoise in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico. The Council is a private, non-profit organization comprised of hundreds of professionals and laypersons who share a common concern for desert tortoises in the wild and a commitment to advancing the public's understanding of the species. For the purposes of the Council, desert tortoise includes the species complex in the southwestern United States and in Mexico, currently referred to as Gopherus agassizii, Gopherus morafkai, and Gopherus evgoodei.

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Max Havelka

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Sky Esser

Back Page Announcements

Sponsor the 2023 Desert Tortoise Council Symposium

The Desert Tortoise Council would like to extend our gratitude to organizations who partner with us and sponsor our symposium year after year. We could not do this important work without you.

Please consider sponsoring the annual Symposium of the Desert Tortoise Council. This one-time donation will go directly to defraying the costs of the 47th Annual Symposium.

Thank you to those listed below who sponsored our 2022 symposi- wonderful, and rich with bio-

Your generous donations, sponsorships, and partnerships are integral in every way to making

this world more habitable, diversity for future genera-

Bio Logical, LLC

Circle Mountain Biological Consultants, Inc.







Defenders of Wildlife

Ecocentric

ECORP Consulting, Inc.

EDF Renewables

8minute Solar Energy

ERTEC Environmental Systems

Holohil Systems, Ltd.

Ironwood Consulting, Inc

<u>Newfields</u>

POWER Engineers, Inc.

Rincon Consultants, Inc.

Solution Strategies

Southern Nevada Environmental, Inc. (SNEI)

SWCA Environmental Consultants

VMSI, Inc.

Walsh Energy Consulting

Wildlands









ECORP Consulting, Inc.













RINCON CONSULTANTS, INC.









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