



DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

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Via email only

8 September 2020

Bureau of Land Management
Attn: Northern Corridor
345 East Riverside Drive
St. George, UT 84790
BLM_UT_NorthernCorridor@blm.gov

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Utah Ecological Services Field Office
2369 West Orton Circle
West Valley City, Utah 84119
laura_roman@fws.gov, Hilary_Whitcomb@fws.gov

RE: Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Draft Habitat Conservation Plan Amendments addressing actions related to the Northern Corridor Highway in Washington County, Utah

Dear Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

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 desert tortoise species. Established in 1975 to promote conservation of tortoises in the deserts of the southwestern United States and Mexico, the Council routinely provides information and other forms of assistance to individuals, organizations, and regulatory agencies on matters potentially affecting desert tortoises within their geographic ranges.

Please understand that these first six pages serve to summarize a myriad of concerns that we have. This is a cover letter prefacing a set of tables and attachments where 255 of our substantive comments are documented. We fully expect that the agencies will address each of our comments, and in many places, correct deficiencies and errors that we have identified in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) and May 2020 Amended Habitat Conservation Plan (Amended HCP). We have rigorously avoided questions and statements that warrant a response of "comment noted" from the agencies. With a very few exceptions (see Comment 23), we have asked questions that require substantive answers from the agencies and subsequent modifications to the documents.

We have used a consistent approach in our tabulated comments (and Attachment C) including use of colored fonts that will help the agencies understand our concerns and facilitate substantive responses. As an approach, we have cut-and-pasted specific wording from the referenced documents into numbered comments (e.g., Comment 1 through 255) and indicated from which document and portion thereof the text is extracted. Each of the 255 comments is prefaced by “Text,” shown in red, and immediately followed by our “Comment,” shown in regular font. It is within our regular-font “Comment” text that we have identified specific issues and questions that we expect to be addressed as changes in the Final EIS and newly-revised HCP. Additional instructions as they relate to the tables appear on page 7, with the preface “Dear Agency Reviewers.”

By no means an exhaustive list of our concerns (the tabulated comments are intended to document those), a few of our programmatic concerns follow.

1. The DEIS (see Attachment A for a list of acronyms used in our letter) has failed to substantiate or demonstrate a clear nexus between Washington County pursuing the HCP/ITP and UDOT’s proposal for the Northern Corridor. The ITP has functioned for 24 years, between 1996 and 2020, and only provisionally since 2016. Since the USFWS would issue the 10a permit, not the BLM, the documents have failed to convince us that the BLM’s No Action Alternative (a NEPA requirement) necessarily precludes USFWS from issuing the ITP (a FESA requirement).

2. The trigger to revise the HCP and reissue the ITP is the 2016 expiration date, not UDOT’s desire to develop the Northern Corridor. In the absence of UDOT’s proposal, the HCP could have been revised and the ITP reissued in response to the expiration date, and 66,301 acres of occupied and potential tortoise habitats could have been identified as available for development. Linking the reissuance of the ITP to the Northern Corridor is contrived to create a fatally flawed relationship between two unrelated actions, where ostensibly one action cannot occur but for the other, which is neither explained nor clearly supported in the DEIS’ analyses.

3. The Council does not recognize Alternatives 2 (T-Bone), 3 (UDOT’s original Northern Corridor), or 4 (Southern Alignment) as being substantially different, as all three “alternatives” violate the precept of the original HCP, Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, and other agreements predicated on protecting the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve in exchange for developing tortoise habitats since 1996. Those agreements still require that the Reserve be managed in perpetuity, which would be violated by constructing the new freeway.

4. There is no way to reverse the development that has been authorized throughout Washington County since 1996, so conservation of the Reserve cannot now be compromised by allowing development of the Northern Corridor. The 22,822 acres of tortoise habitats developed since 1996 have been offset by the conservation of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, and more than 500 tortoises (excluding those that were tested positive for Upper Respiratory Tract Disease, which were not translocated) have been displaced in exchange for protecting tortoises within the Reserve. To now undermine that protection by running a freeway through the densest tortoise concentrations in the Reserve is a violation of the 1996 permit’s function, which was to provide for conservation and recovery *in perpetuity*.

5. The Council asserts that what Washington County is calling “necessary development” should be matched by “necessary conservation” of the Reserve. Since 1996, the County has developed tortoise habitats on the promise of conservation management within the Reserve, which has been compromised by stochastic events like fire and by uncontrollable impacts like raven predation, weed proliferation, crushing tortoises along roads within the Reserve, and tortoise poaching that persist in spite of management under the 1995 HCP. We do not accept the Northern Corridor as a valid Changed Circumstance, which we construe to be factors or events that are outside the control of the Applicants. Recent fires are a good example of a Changed Circumstance, not a new freeway that can be avoided.

6. Since the 46,098 acres of critical habitat within the boundaries of the Red Cliffs NCA are deemed to be too small to promote population viability (page 3-48 of the DEIS), we assert that the addition of 6,760 acres of ostensibly occupied tortoise habitat within Zone 6, which is neither critical habitat nor contiguous to the Reserve or NCA, cannot be considered a realistic mitigation to offset the avoidable impact of bisecting the existing Reserve with the Northern Corridor. Since the BLM, USFWS, and HCP Partners are obligated to perform analyses and base prudent management decisions on the results, only increased conservation management within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve without the new freeway is warranted. By disabling the UVRU as a functional recovery unit, the Northern Corridor will preclude recovery across the range.

7. As proposed, Zone 6 is inadequate as mitigation for the incidental take of the tortoise and development of tortoise habitat, for the following reasons.

- Zone 6 is isolated from the actual Reserve. We found no management actions in the HCP that would provide an adequate corridor to connect and maintain this connection for the tortoise between Zone 6 and the actual Reserve.

- Because of its apparent isolation from other known areas of desert tortoises and occupied tortoise habitat, it is too small to assure the long-term persistence of its isolated tortoise population from genetic, environment, and/or stochastic events, as human-caused climate change is exacerbating environmental stochastic events such as extreme or prolonged drought and increased frequency and size of fire.

- Zone 6 has no data on the status of the tortoise throughout its boundaries or data on tortoise trend. Because tortoises are not uniform in distribution, we do not know if the sampling methods used to determine tortoise densities were statistically robust to accurately determined tortoise density throughout all lands within Zone 6.

- We found no commitment of funding for the management and enhancement of tortoise habitat in perpetuity.

- We understand there are plans for a highway (e.g., “Western Corridor”) to be built through or immediately adjacent to Zone 6, which will impair its function.

- Management activities that would be allowed in Zone 6 include many that are not allowed in the Reserve and are not compatible with the long-term survival of the tortoise.

- Local, regional, and rangewide losses of tortoises throughout the listed population, the past and recent impacts of fire, and the failure of the 1995 HCP to maintain stable, much less increasing tortoise populations within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, all warrant that the **entire** Red Bluffs ACEC be identified as part of Zone 6, even without development of the Northern Corridor through the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve.

If the above concerns are sufficiently addressed in the 2020 HCP and Implementation Agreement, Zone 6 could be considered as part of an overall conservation plan for the Applicant's requested incidental take of 66,301 acres of occupied and potential tortoise habitat, but not a mitigation measure to offset impacts of a new freeway through the primary Reserve.

8. Estimated tortoise densities have declined substantially in the Reserve from 1999 (Zone 3 = 33.4 tortoises per km²; Zones 2, 3, and 5 = 29.1 tortoises per km²) to 2019 (Zone 3 = 12.3 per km²; Zones 2, 3, and 5 = 17.2 per km²) (this and other references appear in the tables). If the long-term declining trend of tortoise densities continues, the density will be below the amount needed for viability of 3.9 adults per km². Populations of Mojave desert tortoises with adult densities below this number are in danger of extinction. The amended HCP must address these declines rather than serve as a vehicle to promote the Northern Corridor.

9. We are particularly concerned that none of the environmental documents disclose that the foreseeable "Western Corridor" would bisect the Red Bluffs ACEC and border the western boundary of the proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve. Whereas, the environmental documents laud the "improved conservation status" and "beneficial management actions" in the new Zone 6 management area, they fail to identify the direct and indirect effects that would result from the planned-for Western Corridor. In planning for the Western Corridor, the agencies and HCP Partners have intentionally excluded the western half of the Red Bluffs ACEC from the Zone 6 satellite reserve to accommodate another new freeway, which is not even mentioned in the cumulative effects analysis. We are also concerned that if only the eastern half of the Red Bluffs ACEC is protected in reserve status, the excluded western half of the ACEC will be adversely impacted by human activities displaced from the newly-designated satellite reserve.

10. Recurring, ubiquitous wildfires, persisting raven predation on tortoises, proliferation of weed species, documented poaching of tortoises, the injury and death of 146 tortoises crushed on existing roads inside the Reserve, the stockpiling of plan fees documented at more than seven million dollars when needed conservation activities have remained unfunded, and now active planning for the Northern Corridor are evidence that the 1995 HCP is not functioning as intended. We contend that a 41% decline in tortoises in the Reserve since 1995 is evidence that the HCP is not functioning as intended, and in fact, needs to be bolstered without accommodating the Northern Corridor.

11. The 2020 draft Implementation Agreement for the Amended HCP says, "The regional, cooperative conservation goals were incorporated into the 1995 HCP and it was designed to promote recovery of the MDT in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit and meet substantially the applicable recommendations of the Desert Tortoise (Mojave Population) Recovery Plan published by the Service in 1994." Because these conservation goals were not met under the 1995 HCP, we request the 2020 HCP conservation program, which is mostly a continuation of the 1995 HCP, be substantially revised to implement a conservation program for the tortoise that uses the best available science throughout the requested 25-year Permit Term. The conservation program should have goals of substantially increasing tortoise numbers and densities above the current level for the Reserve and other areas in the UVRU; increasing the quantity, quality, and connectivity of tortoise habitat across the Reserve, tortoise habitat outside the Reserve, tortoise habitat outside the permit area, and habitat that connects to the to the Beaver Dam Slope Recovery Unit; and provide assurances of this management in perpetuity.

12. In the 2020 HCP, the habitat that the Applicant has mapped as potential tortoise habitat is much larger than the areas mapped in the 1995 HCP and authorized by the 1996 ITP. The Applicant is requesting additional take of 66,301 acres of occupied and potential tortoise habitat as a surrogate for take of tortoises. In the 1996 ITP, the Applicant was authorized to conduct Covered Activities on 24,096 acres. The request for an amended and renewed HCP in 2020 triggers the requirements of the USFWS' Five Point Policy, No Surprises Rule, and the HCP Handbook in addition to the requirements of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for issuance of an incidental take permit. For issuance of a new or renewed incidental take permit, the ESA requires, among other things, the applicant will, to the maximum extent practicable, minimize and mitigate the impacts of such taking; the applicant will ensure that adequate funding for the plan will be provided; and the taking will not appreciably reduce the likelihood of the survival and recovery of the species in the wild. As given in many of our comments, the Council does not believe that the 2020 HCP satisfies the above requirements.


13. Management of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve must be required *in perpetuity* in the absence of a new freeway because the impacts of the taking of the tortoise since 1996, primarily from development and related infrastructure, are permanent, ongoing, and affect an area greater than the footprint of these projects. In addition, in its 1996 biological opinion the USFWS stated the "Mitigation measures proposed to offset effects of the [1995 HCP's] proposed action....including conservation and management of approximately 38,753 acres of desert tortoise habitat in perpetuity or for as long as it is required under the [Endangered Species] Act." These goals should have corresponding objectives and conservation actions, a schedule for implementation, and guaranteed funding in the 2020 HCP, which as currently written, are not adequately documented.

14. Given the budget presented in Section 8.1.1, Table 20 of the Amended HCP, the County is committing to pay \$27,680,957 over the next 25 years to implement the plan. In response to UDOT's proposed freeway (or variation thereof), the County will pay \$16,171,151 (60% of the total cost) to accommodate the freeway compared to \$11,171,592 (40% of the total cost) to implement the plan without the freeway. And, this is only a fraction of the freeway-related costs, as it does not consider BLM and state agency expenditures that would not occur but for the freeway. In light of these observations, the Amended HCP seems more like a 16.2 million dollar mitigation package to accommodate UDOT's project than a proactive plan intended to recover tortoises.

15. Finally, we are dismayed to read the proponent-biased rhetoric given at the top of page 127 of the Amended HCP that "a deal is a deal," which clearly favors the HCP Partner beneficiaries at the expense of tortoise conservation and recovery in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, which does not seem to any longer be part of the "deal." That such a statement appears in this Amended HCP is evidence that the authors have not fully considered the significant ramifications of violating agreements pertaining to the 1995 HCP and its 1996 ITP by facilitating freeway development as part of the 2020 revised HCP.

Again, the general comments given above only summarize some of the categorical concerns we have, which are addressed in statement-specific comments in the tables that follow. We appreciate this opportunity to provide input and trust that our comments will help protect tortoises during any authorized project activities. Herein, we ask that the Desert Tortoise Council continue to be identified as an Affected Interest for this and all other BLM projects that may affect species of desert tortoises, and that any subsequent environmental documentation for this particular project is provided to us at the contact information listed above. *Please acknowledge receipt of this cover letter and table of issues to me at eac@deserttortoise.org.*

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ed LaRue", is positioned above the typed name.

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

Desert Tortoise Council, Ecosystems Advisory Committee, Chairperson

Dear Agency Reviewer,

In the following table, please be aware that the text referenced in the cited sections in the left-hand columns has been cut-and-pasted into the right-hand part of the table, is prefaced by the word, “**Text**,” is shown in “parentheses,” and **in red font**. Our comments, **which we expect to be addressed**, follow each statement in regular font, prefaced by bold-font “**Comment**.” In the cut-and-pasted text where we use bold font, we indicate that the bold emphasis has been added to focus the reviewer on a particular phrase or clause. Please note a number of places where our comments appear in *blue-font italics*, which are intended to inform the agencies of specific issues that we identified in our scoping comments of 1/6/2020 (Desert Tortoise Council 2020) for analysis, which have not been addressed in current documents, and therefore render the DEIS deficient in its analyses of these issues. We still expect the comments and issued to be addressed in the Final EIS.

There are also five Attachments that accompany these tables, as follow:

Attachment A – List of Acronyms used in our tables, which we deemed necessary given the various documents referenced

Attachment B – McLuckie et al. 2020, which shows persisting declines of tortoises throughout the Plan Area by year between 1998 and 2019

Attachment C – Additional Council comments on the May 2020 Amended Habitat Conservation Plan for Washington County, Utah and associated Implementation Agreement

Attachment D – Status of the Mojave Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*)

Attachment E - Abella S.R. and K.H. Berry. 2016. Enhancing and restoring habitat for the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management 7(1):xx-xx; e1944-687X. doi: 10.3996/052015-JFWM-046.

September 2020 Tabulated Comments by Desert Tortoise Council

Draft Environmental Impact Statement Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP Comment Tracking Form					
Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
General Comments Not Affiliated with a Given Section in the Documents					
1	NA	NA	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The Council does not understand, recognize, or support the need to link the development of the Northern Corridor to the reissuance of the 10a permit. In our estimation, these are separate actions; the 10a permit could very well be reissued without constructing the new freeway, and by linking these two separate actions together, BLM, USFWS, and other involved agencies are promoting a fatally-flawed, Catch-22 scenario that constrains the alternatives analysis and predetermines development of the freeway through the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. The Council asserts that the No Action Alternative could simultaneously result in denial of UDOT's application AND result in reissuance of the 10a permit; that though interrelated, these are not mutually exclusive actions as stated in the DEIS (page 2-11 of Vol 2 of the DEIS), and that they should be reconsidered in the Final EIS as two separate actions. In this scenario, the UDOT request would be denied but the 10a permit could be reissued; shackling the two separate projects together seems like a scheme rather than a necessity.</p>
2	NA	NA	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The Council does not recognize Alternatives 2 (T-Bone), 3 (UDOT's original Northern Corridor), or 4 (Southern Alignment) as being substantially different, as all three "alternatives" violate the precept of the original HCP, Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, and other agreements predicated on protection of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve in exchange for developing tortoise habitats since 1996. We believe that these three alternatives are fatally flawed as each one violates the conservation agreement established in 1996 resulting in issuance of the original ITP. Given the tortoise declines throughout the range since 2003 (Allison and McLuckie 2018; in 2003 in response to drought and in 2005 in response to wildfire) and documented impacts within the Reserve (including the Turkey Farm Road Fire and Cottonwood Trail fire in July 2020), not only should the Northern Corridor not be developed in the Reserve, we believe that Zone 6 should still be established as a satellite reserve and that it include <i>all</i> of the Red Bluffs ACEC, not just the eastern half, to accomplish the conservation balance that has not resulted since implementation of the 1995 HCP.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
3	NA	NA	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Whereas the emphasis of the three actions (UDOT proposal, HCP/ITP, and RMP amendments) is ostensibly forward-looking for future development and conservation, the analyses fail to acknowledge that management of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, intact, has resulted from 24 years (1996 through 2020) of ITP function, which is now being undermined and negated by developing the Northern Corridor in the very area the 1995 HCP was designed to protect. There is no way to reverse the development that has been authorized throughout Washington County since 1996, so how can conservation of the Reserve now be compromised by allowing development of the Northern Corridor? The 22,822 acres of tortoise habitats developed since 1996 have been offset by the conservation of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, and more than 500 tortoises (excluding those that were tested positive for Upper Respiratory Tract Disease, which were not translocated) have been displaced in exchange for protecting tortoises within the Reserve. Therefore, any development of a freeway through the Reserve violates this existing agreement, and cannot be mitigated by creating a noncontiguous, satellite reserve in Zone 6. <i>Please note on page 14 of our scoping comments (Desert Tortoise Council 2020), we specifically asked that “After revealing these statistics [i.e., that 257 tortoises were displaced since 1996, which we have since learned is more than 500 animals], please show a frequency distribution of the numbers of tortoises taken and the numbers of acres developed on a yearly basis, beginning in 1996 and extending to 2019.” The DEIS has failed to provide this information, is deficient in this respect, which must be resolved in the Final EIS.</i></p>
4	NA	NA	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Development under the 1995 HCP and 1996 ITP is permanent. The mitigation for the development must also be permanent unless there is a compelling biological reason to alter it. If not, then any time a permit expires the permit conditions and mitigation can be altered. The mitigation should include adequate funding to manage the mitigation lands <i>in perpetuity</i>. As we have seen from 1996 to 2020, this has not occurred under the Washington County HCP/ITP. Human-caused fires and tortoises killed on roadways are just a few of the losses of tortoises and habitat because of inadequate management of the Reserve.</p>
5	NA	NA	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We were unable to find a table or other data that show the acreages of private versus BLM lands within the Reserve that would be affected by the three action alternatives. In our review of the maps in Appendix B, Map 3.13-2 is the first one with sufficient resolution to clearly show the extent of private versus public lands affected by the Northern Corridor alternatives 2, 3, and 4. We ask that Map 1.1-2 be added to the front of Appendix B that has</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

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					similar or even greater resolution to the Visual Resource Management maps starting with Map 3.13 showing the four alternatives bisecting the Reserve relative to land ownership. It appears that as much as a quarter or a third of each alternative will occur on private lands with the balance on State and BLM lands. These acreages should be tabulated. It is also not clear anywhere in the DEIS how Northern Corridor development within the Reserve will or will not result in growth-inducing development of private lands within the Reserve, which we ask be discussed in the Final EIS.
6	NA	NA	NA	NA	Comment: Throughout the 2020 HCP, data are provided on numbers of tortoises, densities of tortoises, and areas of habitat. These data cross back and forth between data available in 1995 and 1996 from the HCP, NEPA document, biological opinion, ITP, and recent data presented in 2020. The 1995 and 1996 data are for total number of tortoises and English measurements are used. The more recent data are for adult tortoises only and metric measurements are used. Please present data in both English and metric measurements in the HCP to support comparison of the data, and state when the number of tortoises presented is for all size classes of tortoise or only adults. Without this information, it is impossible to compare changes between 1995 and 2020.
Draft EIS, Volume 1: Executive Summary					
7	1	Cover page	NA	NA	Text: “Because the issuance of a right-of-way would not be in conformance with the existing Red Cliffs NCA RMP, the BLM is also considering potential amendments to the Red Cliffs NCA RMP necessary to approve the right-of-way.” Comment: The Council asks that the Final EIS supplement the information in the DEIS by listing previous decisions in those portions of Utah occupied by tortoises where BLM RMPs have been modified to avoid noncompliance. The purpose of this request is to analyze what seems to be an ill-advised precedent; i.e., if a controversial project such as the Northern Corridor is not in compliance with an RMP, how often has BLM modified its RMPs to facilitate compliance? Specifically, <i>but for</i> the Northern Corridor, would there be the need to revise the two RMPs?
8	ES-1	ES.1	NA	NA	Text: “The Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) applied to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for a right-of-way (ROW) grant on September 18, 2018, to construct a multi-lane, divided highway (referred to as the Northern Corridor) across the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (NCA).”

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

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					<p>Comment: Where does the DEIS outline the previous failed attempts to construct the Northern Corridor? Which entities have previously recommended or promoted its construction? Having failed in all previous attempts, this latest attempt involving UDOT seems like one last, new attempt to construct a freeway that has been rejected in every previous attempt. In the appropriate amended section of the Final EIS, we ask that the previous attempts be documented including responses of the BLM and USFWS, in particular, which have (until now) always opposed a Northern Corridor through the Reserve. <i>We note that we specifically asked at the top of page 13 in our scoping comments (Desert Tortoise Council 2020) that the history of failed attempts to construct the Northern Corridor through the Reserve be documented in the DEIS. Failure to do so renders this DEIS deficient.</i></p>
9	ES-2	ES.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “As a result of the ITP and protective management of the Reserve’s land base by the respective land managing agencies, necessary development has been able to occur in tortoise habitat on non-Federal lands in the County” (emphasis added).</p> <p>Comment: The Council asserts that “necessary development” should be matched by “necessary conservation” of the Reserve. Since 1996, the County has developed tortoise habitats on the promise of conservation management within the Reserve, which has been compromised by stochastic events like fire and by uncontrollable impacts like raven predation, weed proliferation, and tortoise poaching that are uncurbed by USFWS, BLM, or Washington County management. Now, what should be controllable (i.e., denial of UDOT’s proposed freeway through the Reserve) is being promoted.</p>
10	ES-2	ES.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The ROW application is designed to address the growing [human] population and transportation needs in Washington County.”</p> <p>Comment: The Council offers the following statement as being equally important to renewing the RMP, reissuing the HCP, and denying all action alternatives that bisect the Reserve: “The ROW application is being denied to address, in part, the declining populations of desert tortoises within the Reserve, recent habitat impacts that have undermined the quality of habitat, and persisting inability of the Reserve to provide conservation that is commiserate with the anticipated take level.”</p>
Draft EIS, Volume 2: Chapters 1 through 4					

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
11	2-9	2.3	NA	2.3-1	<p>Text: “Open to aboveground and buried utilities.”</p> <p>Comment: This phrase pertains to Red Cliffs NCA RMP Amendment Alternative C. For the record, the Council opposes any measures that would facilitate any more development within the Reserve that would not happen <i>but for</i> the Northern Corridor. Would this allow for construction of utility poles along the freeway? If so, our concern is that these poles could be used for raven nests, which could be removed, but that they may also be used to facilitate raven perching that leads to increased predation, which would be more difficult to control (than nests). If utility poles are installed, new raven nesting and perching opportunities should be avoided.</p>
12	2-11	2.4.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Under this [No Action] alternative, the USFWS would not reissue an ITP to Washington County authorizing the take of Mojave desert tortoise subject to the conservation measures in the Amended HCP, and the ITP issued based on the 1995 HCP would expire.”</p> <p>Comment: The DEIS fails to support this statement. The Council asserts that the revised HCP and reissued 10a permit can both be pursued under the No Action Alternative, which is a federal requirement of the BLM not a federal requirement under Section 10(a)(1)(B) of FESA. Although there is obvious BLM involvement in the Reserve, revising the HCP and reissuing the 10a permit are actions that can be pursued by Washington County in the absence of the UDOT freeway alternative. Linking these separate actions together unnecessarily federalizes the 10a permit process, which is a nonfederal approach to authorized take concomitant with conservation. Whereas establishing the Zone 6 satellite reserve is a compromise that shackles the reissuance of the ITP to BLM management, the No Action alternative does not prohibit the reissuance of the ITP, as the DEIS asserts.</p>
13	2-13	2.4.2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The Permit Area contains approximately 1,372,742 acres, or 88 percent, of Washington County; [this is] equivalent to the direct loss of up to 14,466 acres of occupied Mojave desert tortoise habitat and 51,835 acres of potential Mojave desert tortoise habitat within the Permit Area; These combined 66,301 acres represent the extent of Mojave desert tortoise habitat occurring within the Permit Area, outside of the Reserve boundary, on lands that are not under Federal or Tribal management at the time the Amended HCP was prepared; [and] Within the Reserve, the amount of Mojave desert tortoise habitat within the Reserve that may be permanently lost to Covered Activities will not exceed 200 acres over the duration of the ITP Term.”</p> <p>Comment: The Council is concerned that these are the authorized impacts based on the perceived promise of</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

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					conservation in the Reserve. That the Northern Corridor is now being proposed inside the Reserve that was promised to be conserved in 1995 violates the premise of the 1996 ITP, which at the time of this writing is still in effect. Additional impacts would be guaranteed under 10a permit reissuance, but conservation is only being promised; that there is evidence that these promises can be subsequently compromised, undermines the faith that these agreements will be binding and irreversible during or upon completion of the 25-year term of the reissued ITP.
14	2-13	2.4.2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Within the Reserve, the amount of Mojave desert tortoise habitat within the Reserve that may be permanently lost to Covered Activities will not exceed 200 acres over the duration of the ITP Term.”</p> <p>Comment: Presumably, the BLM and USFWS biologists know that referring to 200 acres of permanently lost habitat reveals a fraction of the actual impacts; there are also predictable indirect impacts that will result [e.g., dust deposition out to 1 km from ROWs within the Reserve (page 3-11 in Vol 2)]. In fact, the “heat maps” included in the public meeting handout provided by BLM show “habitat fragmentation areas” that substantially affect what appears to be half of the entire Reserve. We note the following statement on page 3-56 of Volume 2 “The area for long-term effects because of fragmentation by the road is variable and extends from each road alternative to the southern boundary of the Reserve.” It is our assertion that it is not ONLY the loss of 200 acres from the Reserve, per se, that is unacceptable, but the long-term, fragmenting indirect effects of the freeway alternatives through the Reserve that are contrary to conservation and recovery of the tortoise, which should be the main function of the Reserve.</p>
15	2-18 2-19	2.4.2.6	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The funding would be enough to acquire three times the acreage of land within the proposed Northern Corridor.”</p> <p>Comment: As calculated below in Comment 232, we note that when the five variables are inserted in the DTMOG compensation formula, the multiplying factor equals 5.5, not 3, as implied by the above statement. We believe that development of any form of the Northern Corridor within the Reserve violates the mitigation of impacts of the HCP authorized over the past 24 years; that, after the development of 22,822 acres of tortoise habitats since 1996, proponents cannot now bisect the Reserve, which has functioned to offset those impacts. Even so, why have the HCP Partners opted to reference the DTMOG formula as if it has been used, then adopted a multiplying factor of 3, when it should be 5.5 according to the formula? Again, we believe this minimal-effort mentality may be one of the reasons HCP fees are being stockpiled rather than conscientiously spent to facilitate conservation within the Reserve.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
16	2-18 2-19	2.4.2.6	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The funding would be enough to acquire three times the acreage of land within the proposed Northern Corridor.”</p> <p>Comment: Acreage is only one factor in determining whether habitat is adequate to support a viable population of tortoises (or any other species). In addition to size, the shape and proximity to other habitats and connectivity are important (hence the fatal flaw with the Zone 6 satellite reserve). Also, good habitat quality that is free of stressors and threats (usually human-caused) is important. Based on the information given, the habitats that would be protected in the Zone 6 satellite reserve are not of equal quality to those being lost to the Northern Corridor within the actual Reserve, and the Applicants have failed to realize USFWS’ mitigate to the maximum extent practicable.</p>
17	2-21	2.5	NA	2.5-1	<p>Text: “Manage 860.2 acres of proposed Reserve Zone 6 as open to new ROWs (Map 2.5-1).”</p> <p>Comment: As mentioned in numerous places in our comments, we feel that the entire process has been packaged to accommodate the Northern Corridor, there is minimal commitment by the County, which is relying on the BLM and others (UDWR) to implement the plan with maximum benefit to itself, there is nothing new to reverse steady declines in tortoise numbers within the Reserve, and as an ACEC, the proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve should already be managed for tortoises. This statement is one more “opportunity” the County is maintaining to maximize development with what is simultaneously promotes and new conservation to offset freeway impacts.</p>
18	2-22	2.5	NA	2.5-1	<p>Text: “Management decisions pertaining to reintroduction, relocation, translocation, and population augmentation of Mojave desert tortoises and other special status species were not included in the SGFO RMP.”</p> <p>Comment: The Council interprets this statement reflecting current management to mean that the RMP does not foresee or allow translocation of displaced tortoises into the Zone 6 area. Yet, we understand that in 2019, 15 tortoises were moved off the new Lakes development (now known as DiVario development; pers. comm. Cameron Rognan, 9/2/2020) between St George and proposed Zone 6 lands, and placed onto those lands. If true, how was this unauthorized translocation accommodated? <i>Please note that we asked DEIS authors to address this specific issue on page 15 of our scoping comments, and failure of the DEIS to address this request has rendered the document deficient, which must be addressed in the Final EIS.</i></p>
19	2-22	2.5	NA	2.5-1	<p>Text: “Major goals [of the existing RMP] include the preservation and protection of the desert tortoise and its habitat so as to achieve full recovery of the tortoise as well as other listed or sensitive species found within the Upper Virgin</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>River Recovery Unit (UVRU)."</p> <p>Comment: It does not appear that either Alternative B or C of the RMP modify this "major goal" identified in the existing RMP. Table 2.5-1 identifies many changes that would affect management within the new Zone 6 satellite reserve, but fails to indicate how this "major goal" would be upheld within the existing Reserve; or, how it will be undermined by the development of the Northern Corridor within the Reserve. Please address this deficiency in the Final EIS.</p>
20	2-24	2.5	NA	2.5-1	<p>Text: "Do not authorize SRPs for competitive motorized events in proposed Reserve Zone 6."</p> <p>Comment: The Council supports this prescription in Alternative B, and does not find that competitive motorized events are consistent with recovery-level tortoise conservation. Nor do we believe that continuing to allow competitive <i>nonmotorized</i> events in Zone 6 to be consistent with tortoise conservation and recovery unless the BLM avoids or alleviates the impacts of spectators, which is not addressed in the DEIS.</p>
21	2-24	2.5	NA	2.5-1	<p>Text: "Limitations on the number of participants and spectators to all competitive events will be applied where warranted based on design of the competition and site capabilities" (emphasis added).</p> <p>Comment: Whereas the BLM currently minimizes participation to "up to 300 participants," there is no indication as to how many non-participant visitors are allowed, which may far exceed the number of participants and result in impacts that are certainly not restricted to roadways on which the events occur. The BLM must identify the number of allowable spectators and measures that will minimize impacts by these spectators.</p>
22	2-30	2.7.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: "Although the location [of the Twist Hollow Alignment] may address some resource conflicts with the Mojave desert tortoise, it would not meet the purpose and need to provide for consistency with the statutory purposes of the Red Cliffs NCA, which includes other ecological and scenic resources."</p> <p>Comment: It is not clear why this rationale is being applied to the Twist Hollow Alignment as an alternative considered but rejected when none of the action alternatives, excepting Alternatives 1 and 6, meets the very same "purpose and need to provide for consistency with the statutory purposes of the Red Cliffs NCA." Either this assertion cannot be used to dismiss the Twist Hollow alternative, or Alternatives 2, 3, 4, and 5 should also be dismissed because they also do not meet the purpose and need. It would seem that standards are being used arbitrarily in favor of the Applicant's desire to develop the Northern Corridor.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
23	3-33 3-50	3.5.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: Document authors can tell from our scoping comments of 1/6/2020 that we were very concerned that the DEIS provides a comprehensive description and data-driven analysis of the Affected Environment as it relates to tortoises. Having reviewed hundreds of environmental documents over the past few decades, the referenced scientific information given in this DEIS ranks among the best we have ever seen. So, thanks for that!
24	3-42	3.5.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: Through no fault of the authors, there was no opportunity to report the impacts of the Turkey Farm Road fire and Cottonwood Trail fire in July 2020. Please be sure that the effects of these fires are reported in the Final EIS, including revising Map 3.22-1.
25	3-43 3-44	3.5.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: With regards to recent tortoise translocations, has there been any follow-up monitoring on the short-distance translocation of 15 tortoises into Zone 6 areas from the Lakes development? We ask that this information be added to the translocation discussion in the Final EIS.
26	3-47 3-49	3.5.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: Whereas the statistics and analyses given on pages 3-47 and 3-49 are very useful, they lack the temporal aspect that compares current tortoise densities within the Reserve with tortoise densities in 1995. Are either actual or extrapolated data available for tortoise densities in the Reserve in 1995 compared to 2020? Our concern is that the HCP as written in 1995 has failed to produce increasing or even stable tortoise populations within the Reserve, that the declines due to drought in 2003 and fires in 2005 could not (and cannot) be curtailed by plan administrators, and that the ill-advised Northern Corridor as planned in Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would contribute to the instability. Given these analyses and data, we conclude that tortoises are worse off now than in 1995 and that it is incumbent upon the regulatory agencies to increase conservation management, which in no way can accommodate a completely avoidable impact like the Northern Corridor. The data as presented in this section are being ignored if BLM adopts an alternative that allows the Northern Corridor to be developed. Rather, these data should be an indication to both BLM and USFW that the Reserve, itself, regardless of management of Zone 6, warrants heightened conservation management.
27	3-48	3.5.1.1	NA	NA	Text: "...the small geographic size of both the Reserve and the UVRU compromises the potential viability of the Mojave desert tortoise population." Comment: Given the above statement on page 3-48, how can the agencies now plan for and accommodate the Northern Corridor in the face of documented tortoise declines in a reserve area it already deems to be too small? This

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					is the main reason we do not accept the Zone 6 “compromise” as meaningful to tortoise conservation. If the 46,098 acres of critical habitat within the boundaries of the Red Cliffs NCA are deemed to be too small to promote population viability (page 3-48 of the DEIS), how will the addition of 6,760 acres of (presumably) occupied tortoise habitat within Zone 6 (page 3-57 in Volume 2), which is neither critical habitat nor contiguous to the Reserve or NCA, be considered a realistic means to offset the avoidable impact of bisecting the existing Reserve with the Northern Corridor? If BLM and USFWS are obligated to perform these analyses and base management decisions on the analyses, how can anything but increased conservation management within the Reserve without the new freeway be entertained? The Council contends that by disabling the UVRU as a functional recovery unit, the Northern Corridor will preclude recovery across the range.
28	3-50	3.5.1.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “While the Washington County HCP (1995) explicitly identifies only 87,229 acres of the ITP area as occupied or potential habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise, the HCP states that Mojave desert tortoise could also be found in ‘non-habitat’ areas.”</p> <p>Comment: Stated as a fact without the significance or ramifications of the new findings, the Council interprets these data to show that more occupied and more potential tortoise habitats are now at risk because the revised HCP would allow for the take of all tortoises from occupied habitats in Washington County that would not be protected in Zone 6. That more tortoises are now at risk to authorized take than before is evidence that the HCP should provide for more protection within the Reserve, as tortoises in the Zone 6 area are already protected from development on BLM-designated ACEC lands and from SITLA lands, which do not seem to be in immediate danger of development.</p>
29	3-55	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The issue of indirect effects because of habitat fragmentation was quantified using the number of acres of Mojave desert tortoise habitat located between each ROW alternative and the southern Reserve boundary, for which connectivity to the larger tortoise population may be impaired. [Then] Evaluation of proposed Zone 6 considered acres of Mojave desert tortoise habitat with improved conservation status, and a qualitative review of beneficial management actions.”</p> <p>Comment: We note that the BLM is not disclosing here that the foreseeable “Western Corridor” would bisect the Red Bluffs ACEC and border the western boundary of the proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve. Whereas, the description here lauds the “improved conservation status” and “beneficial management actions” of Zone 6 management, it fails to</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					identify the same indirect effects that would result from the planned-for Western Corridor, which are likely similar to the indirect effects identified for the Northern Corridor within the Reserve. BLM cannot argue that the Western Corridor is an unrelated project, because it has intentionally excluded the western half of the Red Bluffs ACEC from the Zone 6 satellite reserve to accommodate that planned-for development. As given in Appendix A of our scoping comments on 1/6/2020, the Council contends that the rangewide loss of tortoises throughout the listed population, the past and recent impacts of fire (including the Turkey Farm Road and Cottonwood Trail fires), and the failure of the 1995 HCP to maintain stable, much less increasing tortoise populations within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, all warrant that the entire Red Bluffs ACEC be identified as the new Reserve, even without development of the Northern Corridor through the existing Reserve.
30	3-55	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Surveys conducted in Zone 3 during 2017 resulted in a density estimate of 17.2 Mojave desert tortoises per square kilometer (95 percent confidence interval of 12.6 to 23.4; UDWR 2018). The 2019 surveys of Zone 3 resulted in a density estimate of 12.3 animals per square kilometer (95 percent confidence interval of 8.7 to 17.5; UDWR 2020; refer to Table 3.5-3).”</p> <p>Comment: We are concerned with the ramifications that “All subsequent analyses in Zone 3 uses [sic] the density estimate of 17.2 Mojave desert tortoises per square kilometer.” These data show there has been a reduction of about five tortoises per square kilometer in the two years between 2017 and 2019, which we interpret to mean two things: (1) There have been recent and continuing catastrophic declines within the Reserve that are being dismissed as “statistical” artifacts; and, in our estimation, (2) these declines are likely real, show that current management has failed to avoid the declines, and warrants enhanced protection WITHIN the Reserve, which will not be addressed by creating a noncontiguous satellite reserve in Zone 6. The DEIS has failed to demonstrate that new protections will be implemented within the Reserve to curtail these declines, and by this statistical interpretation, are blatantly dismissing apparent declines that threaten to jeopardize the stability of tortoise populations within the Reserve even in the absence of the Northern Corridor and certainly not addressed by creating the satellite reserve in Zone 6.</p>
31	3-56	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The analysis area for indirect effects from the Northern Corridor alternatives that do not require construction of a new roadway includes suitable Mojave desert tortoise habitats within 300 feet on either side of the ROW within the Reserve. The analysis area is smaller because ROW fencing on both sides of the highway excludes tortoises from</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>entering the ROW, and tortoises occupying this area have likely been exposed to the wildland-urban interface, including the existing road.”</p> <p>Comment: Please indicate the existing literature that supports this reduced indirect impact associated with fencing. We believe that the two main advantages of fencing roadways are reducing the number of tortoises that would otherwise be crushed and reducing the number of other animals that would be crushed that then serve to attract and subsidize tortoise predators, particularly common ravens and coyotes. There is no evidence in the literature that the following indirect impacts are curtailed by fencing: increased incidence of fire, proliferation of weeds, increased access to poaching (particularly since the BLM is proposing bike and walking paths either side of the freeway), increased nitrogen deposition, etc. For these indirect impacts, we do not believe that the 300-foot area used in this analysis is sufficient or scientifically justified to realistically include all indirect impacts resulting from fence installation.</p>
32	3-58	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Recent stabilization of the [tortoise] population may be occurring, though at lower levels than pre-fire conditions.”</p> <p>Comment: We question the veracity of this statement because data given on page 5-55 (see also Attachment B following these tables) statistically show declines of five tortoises/square kilometer between 2017 and 2019, which is in direct conflict with this statement, and demonstrates declining populations, not stabilizing populations.</p>
33	3-58	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “As part of the review process, the USFWS may determine that measures in addition to those proposed should be included to minimize and mitigate ROW and RMP revisions.”</p> <p>Comment: In addition to the four bullets following this statement, the Council continues to emphasize the inclusion of the entire Red Bluffs ACEC in the Zone 6 satellite reserve. <i>We proposed this measure in our scoping comments (top of page 8 of Desert Tortoise Council 2020) but do not see any acknowledgement of this proposal in the DEIS (e.g., alternatives considered but rejected), and therefore consider the DEIS to be deficient in this respect, which must be addressed in the Final EIS.</i></p>
34	3-58	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “HCP and ITP No Action Alternative: Under the No Action Alternative, the USFWS would not grant an ITP to Washington County, and the 1995 Washington County HCP would expire.”</p> <p>Comment: The DEIS has failed to substantiate or demonstrate a clear nexus between Washington County pursuing</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the HCP/ITP and UDOT's proposal for the Northern Corridor. The ITP has functioned for 24 years, between 1996 and 2020, and only provisionally since 2016. Since the USFWS issues the 10a permit, not the BLM, how does the No Action Alternative (a BLM requirement) prohibit USFWS from issuing the ITP (a FESA requirement)? The trigger to revise the HCP and reissue the ITP should be the 2016 expiration date, not UDOT's desire to develop the Northern Corridor. In the absence of UDOT's proposal, the HCP would have been revised and the ITP reissued in response to the expiration date, and 66,301 acres of occupied and potential tortoise habitats could still be available for development (page 360, Volume 2). Linking the reissuance of the ITP to the Northern Corridor is contrived to create a fatally flawed relationship between two unrelated actions, where one action cannot occur <i>but for</i> the other, which is neither explained nor clearly supported in the DEIS' analyses.
35	3-59	3.5.2.1	NA	3.5-10	Comment: In addition to identifying numerous flaws associated with management of Zone 6 to offset development of the Northern Corridor (e.g., non-contiguous location, small size, authorized competitive recreation events, etc.), we note that the indirect impacts associated with Alternatives 2 (3,586 acres), 3 (2,652 acres), and 4 (2,021 acres) compared to the 6,760 acres in Zone 6, constitute indirect impacts to the primary Reserve of 53% for Alternate 2 (i.e., 53% of the 6,760 acres supposedly gained), 39% for Alternative 3, and 30% for Alternative 4. In other words, the indirect impacts associated with these three alternatives would comprise between a third and a half of the projected conservation value attributed to management of Zone 6, which further undermines any real mitigation by adopting this compromise. Whereas we recognize that fencing the Northern Corridor would be a <i>minimization</i> measure (and that there are no mitigation measures within the actual Reserve), where are the commiserate <i>mitigation</i> measures (e.g., habitat compensation) to offset indirect impacts? We believe that if the Applicant was sincere in achieving mitigation of impacts to the maximum extent practicable, that it would have recommended the <i>entire</i> Red Cliffs ACEC to mitigate impacts rather than just the eastern half.
36	3-60	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	Comment: Furthermore, the list of Covered Activities described at the top of page 3-60 indicate they must be "...non-Federal and performed within the Analysis Area for the HCP." Though not funded, since the Northern Corridor is an action that would be both <i>authorized</i> and <i>carried out</i> by the BLM, it is not therefore a federalized action that cannot be a Covered Activity, as described in this section of the DEIS? This assertion is further substantiated in the following statement "If the BLM issues UDOT a ROW grant for the <u> </u> Alignment, it is

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					anticipated that UDOT would design and construct a highway through the Reserve and Red Cliffs NCA.” Again, this is one of the three caveats (“fund, authorize, or carry out”) that federalizes a project that cannot be considered a Covered Activity by the HCP/ITP.
37	3-63	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “With approval of a highway alternative through the Reserve, Washington County would provide funding and technical assistance to UDOT for culverts under Cottonwood Springs Road within Reserve Zone 3 that would help restore some of the potential for Mojave desert tortoise movement across this preexisting internal barrier.”</p> <p>Comment: It is our understanding that fees collected under Section 10a of FESA are intended to promote conservation of tortoises, and that the need for culverts predates the Changed Circumstance that would facilitate the Northern Corridor. We note that the 1995 HCP required that, “Cottonwood Rd will either be gated where it crosses the northern and southern boundary of the Reserve, or it will be fenced” (Section 5.2.1). Therefore, in our estimation these culverts should already have been developed, and in fact should still be developed even if the BLM’s No Action alternative is selected. As written, the reader is led to believe that <i>but for</i> the Northern Corridor, these culverts will not be developed, which is irresponsible and misleading.</p>
38	3-63	3.5.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “This [data collected between 2011 and 2017] reveals there is an important desert tortoise population cluster located within the path of the T-Bone Mesa Alignment, UDOT Application Alignment, and Southern Alignment Alternatives within the Reserve. This may be the most important high-density cluster of desert tortoises in the recovery unit (USFWS 2020a) [emphasis added]. Map 3.5-5 provides a visual representation of the habitat fragmentation discussed previously.”</p> <p>Comment: The Council asserts that this area of high density tortoise concentration is facilitated by, if not created by, protections granted under the 1995 HCP and subsequent BLM management. This tortoise concentration, then, has resulted from proactive conservation provided by the existing permits and management plans, which have concomitantly authorized the development and permanent loss of 22,822 acres of tortoises habitats from Washington County since 1996. To develop these habitats now after 26 years of cumulative loss of 22,822 acres of tortoise-occupied habitats would be an unmitigable violation of the tenuous conservation balance accomplished under existing permits within the Reserve (see discussion in the Amended HCP on page 2), which cannot be mitigated by creating a noncontiguous satellite reserve in Zone 6.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
39	3-125	3.15	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The Washington County Amended HCP and the USFWS’s potential issuance of an ITP to Washington County would not impact recreation and visitor services outside of proposed Zone 6.”</p> <p>Comment: Although we understand the intent of this statement, we ask that USFWS take a second look at the statement considering the following concerns. Given the persisting declining trends for tortoises in the Reserve, are there current recreational activities in the Reserve that need to be curtailed or modified to further protect tortoises? For example, in March 2020 there was an EA designed to improve the Cottonwood Trailhead into the Reserve. Whereas we understand that this action is considered in its own NEPA process, we ask that USFWS take a hard look at allowable recreation development given the declining tortoise trends. Although we understand that the recent Turkey Farm Road fire was started by illegal use of fireworks in the Reserve, we wonder if the perpetrators were even aware that they were inside a Reserve and that fireworks are prohibited? Could increased or different patterns of law enforcement in the Reserve have prevented this and other human-caused fires? As such, we ask that USFWS and HCAC continue to look for new ways to educate the recreating public, which currently is missing from both the DEIS and Amended HCP.</p>
40	3-128	3.15.1.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The SGFO RMP designates much of Washington County, including BLM-administered portions of proposed Zone 6, as an Extensive Recreation Management Area (ERMA).”</p> <p>Comment: The Council is concerned that referring to a conservation area for “extensive recreation” will undermine the intended, new use of Zone 6 for tortoise conservation. Therefore, we ask that the ERMA designation be removed from Zone 6 in the foreseeable likelihood that one of the pro-Northern Corridor alternatives will be adopted.</p>
41	3-128 3-133	3.15.1.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The area of proposed Zone 6 has been a popular destination for recreational users for decades, with recent estimated visitor use on BLM-administered and SITLA lands totaling 82,775 annual visits (pers. com. Kiel 2019b, pers. com. Voyles 2020). [And] “...these users are likely to seek out experiences on public lands further west of proposed Zone 6.”</p> <p>Comment: At this point, we are taking the opportunity to express our concern that there are no versions of the modified RMPS that can be reviewed at this time. Certainly, decisions being made now may be interpreted in different ways, which will express themselves in the revised RMPs. Therefore, we believe that specific revisions to the RMPs should have been identified and made available as part of the current review process. We note that this is</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the only place in the DEIS where BLM acknowledges that recreation activity displaced from the east half of the ACEC onto the west half of the ACEC is likely to occur. <i>This single sentence does not constitute the analyses we requested on page 10 of our scoping comments, nor do we see any measures in the DEIS that BLM intends to implement to curtail displaced, illegal activities onto those parts of the ACEC not included in the proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve, which we identify as a deficiency of the DEIS that must be addressed in the Final EIS.</i>
42	3-129 3-133 3-134	3.15.2.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Section 3.15.2.3. states: “Existing competitive use events that have an SRP would be unaffected by implementation of the HCP. On BLM-administered lands, Alternatives B and C would not alter how motorized SRPs are issued in the proposed Zone 6.”</p> <p>Comment: Page 3-129 indicates there are five competitive events currently in Zone 6, which we understand would continue to be permitted under all three SGFO RMP alternatives. Given this information, we feel that the discussion in Section 3.15.2.3 fails to describe the nature of these events and associated impacts. How many participants and spectators would continue to be allowed in a Zone 6 satellite reserve? How would the SGFO RMP be modified, if at all, to curtail impacts of these five competitive events in the satellite reserve? Has BLM monitored the competitive events, and if so, what are the documented impacts? Based on these data or anecdotal observations, how will the events be conducted to promote tortoise conservation in the satellite reserve? This information needs to be added to the Final EIS.</p>
43	3-141 3-143	3.18	NA	3.18-1	<p>Comment: Although we recognize that Table 3.18-1 would function to divert the reader to 11 other sections addressing NCA Objects and Values, we find that Section 3.18 fails in its consistency with both previous and subsequent sections to make clear and factual statements as to the Environmental Consequences associated with each action alternative (excepting Alternatives 1 and 6) relative to governing laws and agreements. It is clear to us by the information presented relative to the OPLMA (“Act;” page 3-141) and prescriptions given in BLM Manual 6260 (“Manual”) as they relate to NCAs (pages 3-141 and 3-142), that all action alternatives (2, 3, 4, and 5) would violate the intent and function of the Act and Manual by developing the Northern Corridor. We contend that although BLM can alter its RMPs to approve any of the Northern Corridor alternatives, they cannot change either the OPLMA or management criteria for NCAs, and that both are violated by all action alternatives (excluding 1 and 6), and that recommended changes to the RMP do not elevate any of the action items to mitigate impacts to either the Act’s or</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					Manual's intent. We contend that Section 3.18 needs to describe each of the six alternatives as they relate to the OPLMA and BLM Manual 6260 rather than redirect the reader to 11 other sections that do not directly address either the Act or the Manual.
44	3-144	3.19	NA	NA	<p>Text: "Decisions to be made by the BLM in this Draft EIS would not affect or alter the management of ACECs managed by the SGFO outside proposed Zone 6. Therefore, the analysis area for ACECs is the proposed Zone 6 boundary."</p> <p>Comment: The Council disagrees with these statements on page 3-144 for the following reasons. As stated in the DEIS on page 3-133, the BLM anticipates that reduced recreation activity in Zone 6 will displace those activities to the west, which corresponds to the remainder of the Red Bluffs ACEC (see Map 2.5-15 in Appendix B). Please indicate how ACEC management and monitoring of recreation use will be changed to address this foreseeable impact.</p>
45	3-144	3.19	2.5-15	NA	<p>Comment: We understand that the BLM is actively planning for a Western Corridor along the western boundary of the proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve but fails to divulge this in the DEIS (a "Western Corridor Connector" is identified on page 3-179 but is not mapped; see Comment 58 below with regards to enhanced mapping requests). We ask that the rationale for the current western boundary of Zone 6 be described in the Final EIS section corresponding to Section 3.19 of the DEIS.</p>
46	3-57 3-144	3.19	2.5-15	NA	<p>Text: "All habitats within the Reserve below 4,500 feet in elevation are considered currently occupied Mojave desert tortoise habitat, and all habitats between 4,500 feet and 5,000 feet are considered potential future occupied habitats."</p> <p>Comment: Though difficult to tell from Map 2.5-15, which does not show contours or elevations, it appears that Boomer Hill may be the highest elevation in the Red Bluffs ACEC, which is at 3,800 feet elevation. Why, then, are only 2,345 acres of the 6,168-acre Red Bluffs ACEC (38%) being considered for Zone 6 management when the entire ACEC is well within the elevational range the DIES identifies as occupied by desert tortoises? Furthermore, what is the undisclosed reasoning for including the SITLA lands in the Zone 6 satellite reserve without including the western 3,823 acres of the ACEC, which are within the correct elevational range for tortoises and likely less impacted than the SITLA lands?</p>
47	3-146	3.20.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: "...the BLM's issuance of a ROW could impact future land tenure actions including acquisitions of non-Federal lands crossed by an alternative."</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					Comment: We are concerned with the above statement and no additional explanation. What does this statement mean with regards to the private parcels that would be affected by BLM's endorsement of any one of the four action alternatives (2, 3, 4, and 5) that would cross private lands? Does the BLM still intend to acquire and manage these private lands if one of these four alternatives is approved?
48	3-150 3-152	3.21	NA	NA	Comment: We find that, in the absence of grazing history, the actual benefits implied in Section 3.21 on grazing are not obvious. Whereas we believe that eliminating grazing from areas managed for tortoise conservation are ultimately beneficial, we cannot ascertain the actual, immediate benefit in the absence of use data. Therefore, we ask that BLM supplement this discussion in the Final EIS to show how recently these allotments have been grazed, and to what extent relative to allowable versus actual AUM data. How many ranchers would be affected by retiring these allotments? What have BLM range health assessments of these allotments (if any) revealed as they pertain to relative habitat quality to tortoises?
49	3-150 3-152	3.21	NA	NA	Text: "...unavailable for livestock grazing..." Comment: What exactly does the above, repetitively-used clause mean? Does this mean that the allotments would be retired and permanently "removed from the books?" Please explain the administrative action and its temporal ramifications in the Final EIS; e.g., does this mean "in perpetuity," with no ability of BLM to reestablish the allotments at a later date, under a future RMP revision?
50	3-152	3.22	3.22-1	NA	Comment: Please modify Map 3.22-1 in the Final EIS to show the extent of the Turkey Farm Road and Cottonwood Trail fires. Based on Map 3.22-1, it appears there have been no documented fires in the southern part of the Reserve that would be impacted by the four action alternatives. Based on BLM's statements in Section 3.22.1 about threat of future fires, we believe that these two fires, alone, should be construed as Changed Circumstances; that, as a result of these two events, the southern portions of the Reserve are now more vulnerable to new fires and that development of the Northern Corridor will predictably increase the likelihood of new fires. We believe that this fact, alone, is sufficient reason for BLM to deny the Northern Corridor. We ask that the discussion of Vegetation Condition Classes (VCC) be reconsidered in light of these fires in the Final EIS, and that new indices be developed as necessary to describe conditions following the fires, which requires reconsideration of Table 3.22-2.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
51	3-129 3-180	3.28	NA	3.28-1	Comment: We note on page 3-129 that there have been five competitive mountain bike events in the Zone 6 area. However, it is not clear if these events will continue to be allowed or if BLM judges they are compatible with elevated conservation management for tortoises (particularly with regards to impacts by spectators). Since this issue has already been raised in Comments 41 and 42 above, we believe that the vague statement that there are “...45 permit applications for activities ... in various locations” (see page 3-180 in Table 3.28-1) needs to be clarified. We ask that all permitted motorized and nonmotorized routes in both the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve and proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve be mapped and further described as they affect the analysis, which should be added to the Final EIS.
52	3-183 3-184	3.28.1.4	NA	3.28-1	Text: “The implementation of the Washington County Amended HCP, which includes expanded protection of proposed Zone 6, continues to help offset the long-term, cumulative impacts to Mojave desert tortoise from development in the county on non-Federal lands” (emphasis added). Comment: We note the irony in this statement that whereas the HCP may have functioned in this protective capacity since 1996 (see page 2 of the Amended HCP), current proposals will effectively jeopardize this balance, and no longer offset cumulative impacts. The minimal additional management in Zone 6 would not offset cumulative impacts to the actual Reserve, particularly if BLM adopts an alternative that will allow subsequent utility development inside the Reserve (Alternative C of the RMP).
53	3-189	3.28.1.15	NA	NA	Text: “No reasonably foreseeable actions identified in Table 3.28-1 would affect State LWCF lands within the analysis area.” Comment: The statement given above with regards to cumulative effects to Land and Water Conservation Fund Act Lands (LWCF) seems naïve and misleading given that ALL private lands outside the Reserve and Zone 6 would be open to development and loss of biological resources throughout Washington County as the result of reissuing the ITP, particularly if the Lake Powell Pipeline (which IS listed in Table 3.28-1) is developed: First, State LWCF lands mapped in Map 3.16-1 are only a fraction of the LWCF lands identified in the same map, failing to depict federal LWCF lands, so why are only State lands being referenced? Why not Federal lands as well? Secondly, it is our understanding that the “analysis area” is not restricted to the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, as shown in Map 3.16-1, but that it includes all of Washington County. The full extent of State and Federal LWCF lands need to be mapped within the entire county for the deficiencies characterizing this section to be remedied. Finally, this discussion, which is

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					currently limited to only direct effects of the action alternatives on LWCF lands, should be expanded to discuss the indirect and fragmenting effects to all State and Federal LWCF lands identified elsewhere in the DEIS.
54	3-190	3.28.1.18	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would result in entirely beneficial effects on the Red Bluff ACEC, while Alternatives 1, 5, and 6 would not impact ACECs” (emphasis added).</p> <p>Comment: As noted elsewhere, we believe this statement is erroneous because less than 40% of the Red Bluffs ACEC would be included in the Zone 6 satellite reserve. The BLM admits on page 3-133 that the western parts of the ACEC may be impacted by displaced recreational activities from the eastern portions now being considered in Zone 6. This statement needs to be modified in the Final EIS for accuracy to further identify the deleterious effects of bisecting the ACEC and future uneven management of the two parts.</p>
55	3-190	3.28.1.18	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Events would not create new surface disturbance because they would be limited to established trails.”</p> <p>Comment: As described elsewhere, this statement naively dismisses impacts associated with spectators and from event participants who are likely to camp in areas adjacent to established trails before, during, and after the events. We suggest that this sentence either be removed or modified in the Final EIS to address this concern.</p>
56	Many	App B	See right	NA	<p>Comment: A dozen maps, including the first seven (e.g., 1.1-1, 2.2-1, 2.3-1, 2.3-2, 2.3-3, 2.3-4, 2.3-5, etc.) depict the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve boundary with a dashed line that is indistinguishable from the Red Cliffs NCA, which is depicted as a solid line and superimposed over the Reserve boundary. In fact, it is not until Map 2.4-2 (which does not map the NCA boundary) that we can see the actual Reserve boundary line. Please reconsider the color layout on all affected maps that depict the Reserve so that it can be differentiated from the NCA.</p>
57	B-10	App B	2.4-3	NA	<p>Comment: It is not clear why Zone 6 is not depicted on Map 2.4-3. The Council believes that one of the flaws inherent to designating Zone 6 as a satellite reserve is that it is noncontiguous to the actual, functional Reserve in Zone 3. We therefore ask that Map 2.4-3 be amended to show Zone 6 relative to the other five zones (i.e., Map 2.4-4 does not give the naive reader the overall view of the isolated, disjunct nature of the proposed satellite reserve).</p>
58	NA	App B	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We ask that the BLM amend Map 2.5-15 to show the location of the Western Corridor, so the concerned public can see how Zone 6 areas, as proposed, would be exposed to indirect impacts extending at least a kilometer into the satellite reserve from the west.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
59	NA	App B	NA	NA	Comment: The Council is particularly concerned that habitat fragmentation associated with three of the six alternatives is severe and fatally flaws all three alternatives because it compromises any conservation that has occurred between 1996 and 2020, and violates the OPLMA and BLM Manual 6260. Interestingly, there are very revealing maps in the BLM's public meeting handout (see page 18 of 33 in the Power Point presentation distributed in July 2020) that are not included anywhere in the DEIS. Perhaps this is an oversight or these maps were created after release of the DEIS, but in any case these maps need to be added to Appendix B of the Final EIS so the concerned public can see the extent of habitat fragmentation associated with these three alternatives and just how much of the high density tortoise areas (depicted in red) would be affected by all alternatives.
60	3-48 B-53	3.5.1.1 App B	3.5-5	NA	Text: "...in 2017 Mojave desert tortoise surveys were conducted on 3,000 acres of SITLA and 2,150 acres of BLM-administered land, most of which is included in proposed Zone 6." Comment: With regards to the above statement on page 3-48, none of these data are depicted relative to tortoise densities on Map 3.5-5 in Appendix B. There are other places that refer to tortoise densities in Zone 6 that were unforeseen by the 1995 HCP. In any case, we ask that Map 3.5-5 be amended (or better yet, a new map developed) to reflect tortoise densities in Zone 6 so that the concerned public can see what is being lost (i.e., red zones inside the actual Reserve) compared to what is being "gained" (i.e., tortoise densities inside the proposed satellite reserve). Although the resolution is too small to be meaningful, we note that Figure 3 in the Amended HCP (page 27) shows that all of Zone 6 is characterized by "Low Density MDT Habitats." Absent these data, we do not believe that the agencies can demonstrate that establishing Zone 6 as a new reserve will offset the losses in the actual Reserve from development of the Northern Corridor or the take of tortoises throughout Washington County.
61	B-8 B-178 3-189	3.28.1.15	2.4-1 3.16-1	NA	Comment: With regards to the statement on page 3-189 of Volume 2 that State LWCF lands would not be affected by reissuance of the ITP, the DEIS limits its mapping to State LWCF lands within the Reserve, as mapped in Map 3.16-1. Map 2.4-1 on page B-8 is already rather busy, so we ask that a new map be added to Appendix B that shows the full extent of State and Federal LWCF lands within the analysis area boundary shown in Map 2.4-1, and that the Cumulative Effects analysis given on page 3-189 relative to LWCF be expanded to address all LWCF lands in the County, not just those in the Reserve.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
62	3-179	3.28	NA	3.28-1	Comment: We ask that BLM develop a new map in the Final EIS that shows the locations of each of the proposed developments and uses identified in the Cumulative Effects section in Table 3.28-1. We note, for example, that one of the projects is referred to as the “Western Corridor Connector,” but we cannot tell from the location information given in the table where this project would be developed, or if it would connect to the Western Corridor, which we understand would coincide with the western boundary of Zone 6. We also believe that this will reveal to naïve members of the public that the Washington Parkway terminates at the eastern boundary of the Reserve, and that, <i>but for</i> this Parkway, none of the action alternatives (2, 3, 4, and 5) could be developed, which supports our concern that regulatory agencies have already decided to develop the Northern Corridor, and this EIS process is a formality.
63	3-179	3.28	NA	3.28-1	Comment: The location of the DiVario Development, in particular, is important as it is revealed (for the first time in the DEIS on page 3-180) that this 730-acre development would be <i>within</i> the Zone 6 area, which we assume is in error? This development is identified in two places as bordering the Zone 6 satellite reserve (pages 3-187 and 3-188) but is described as being “ <i>within</i> the northeastern border” in Table 3.28-1 on page 3-180, which we assume will be corrected in the Final EIS.
64	H-2	H.2.1	NA	NA	Text: “There is no current ‘scientific proof of resource degradation’ specifically due to livestock grazing within Zone 6.” Comment: With regards to the above statement, may we interpret this to mean that the BLM has performed range health assessments that demonstrate no grazing impacts? Or, that these data do not exist as range health data have not been collected? As documented in a dozen or more references in Appendix B of the Council’s scoping comments (Desert Tortoise Council 2020), we know that cattle grazing affects habitats and tortoises, so we assume this statement is based on absence of data. Please clarify.
65	NA	App H	NA	NA	Comment: We contend that Appendix H is deficient in its consideration of inconsistencies with numerous regulatory decisions and documents, as follows. (1) On a gross level, the Northern Corridor is inconsistent with and in violation of the intent of the 1995 HCP and implementation of the 1996 ITP. The function of the 1996 ITP over the past 24 years has been predicated on the protection of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. To date, the ITP has authorized development of 22,822 acres of habitat and displacement of more than 500 tortoises in exchange for protection of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. Only Alternatives 1 and 6 are consistent with these existing agreements. Even so, rather

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					than identify these inconsistencies with the HCP, Appendix H unaccountably claims there are no inconsistencies. We note that more than half of the goals and objectives for the function of the Reserve (see Section 2.1 in the Amended HCP) are undermined by introducing the freeway into the Reserve, which is referred to as the “central conservation measure” on page 2 and elsewhere in the Amended HCP. (2) Appendix H fails to acknowledge or elucidate how development of the Northern Corridor is in violation of the OPLMA (page 3-141 of Volume 2) and undermines prescriptions given in BLM Manual 6260 as they relate to NCAs (pages 3-141 and 3-142 in Volume 2). We believe that Appendix H fails to address inconsistencies of all action alternatives with the (3) Federal Land Management Policy Act (FLMPA) and the Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA), particularly as it relates to inconsistencies with both the (4) 1994 Recovery Plan (USFWS 1994) and 2011 revised desert tortoise Recovery Plan (USFWS 2011), and (5) adverse modification of tortoise Critical Habitat [(81 FR 7214), (16 USC §1536(a)(2)), (50 CFR §402.02)]. Appendix H in the Final EIS must be amended to identify and discuss these inconsistencies that are not currently addressed.
Amended¹ Habitat Conservation Plan for Washington County, Utah (May 2020)					
66	i	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “A Renewed/Amended ITP is needed to extend the County’s access to previously authorized, but unrealized, incidental take of the MDT for an extended term of 25 years. Amendments to the 1995 HCP are needed to incorporate developments in the best available science pertaining to the MDT, comply with current USFWS regulations pertaining to ITPs, incorporate current policy regarding amended HCPs (as applicable), and clarify the language to more accurately reflect the intent of the 1995 HCP.”</p> <p>Comment: The 2020 HCP needs to examine the effectiveness, implementation, and adequacy of implementing the Conservation Program of the 1995 HCP, and its appropriateness under current conditions. Information on declines in numbers and densities of tortoises and degradation/loss of tortoise habitat in the areas managed for tortoises (e.g., Fridell et al. 1998 and McLuckie et al. 2020) shows that management has not been effective in moving toward</p>

¹ Throughout our comments, we use the terms “Amended,” “Renewed,” or “2020” HCP to refer to the current, May 2020, Habitat Conservation Plan and endeavor to use the term “1995” to refer to the existing HCP that is proposed to be renewed or amended.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					accomplishing the biological goal for the MDT. Implementation of conservation actions and mitigation is not working for the tortoise. Based on this information, the 2020 HCP needs to do more than continue actions previously identified in the 1995 HCP. The modified/additional conservation actions and mitigation should be linked to the stressors causing the greatest degree and intensity of threats to the UVRRU population of tortoises. Consequently, the sections of the HCP that describe Conservation Program Budget and Funding Assurances need to be revised based on lessons learned from the management of the Reserve since 1996, threats previously not addressed in the HCP or downplayed regarding their importance (e.g., invasive plant species, fire), and the anticipated increase in the number and/or severity of impacts in the future from human population growth, climate change, and their associated stressors (e.g., invasive species, new pathogens, fire, extreme drought and other weather events, etc.).
67	ii	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The ITP having authorized the development of 22,822 acres since 1996 now envisions the further authorized loss of 66,301 acres throughout Washington County. The conservation balance thus far has been achieved by protecting the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, intact (as lauded on page 2 of the Amended HCP). Now, the County plans for three times more impact than has already been realized, the development of a freeway through its primary Reserve, and the establishment of a 6,760 acre satellite reserve, about half of which is on SITLA lands that are outside the jurisdictional control of the County and some of which are likely impaired given their proximity to adjacent urban development in western St George. Project development and habitat loss are being guaranteed on the promise that remaining, unfragmented portions of the soon-to-be impaired Reserve will be protected going forward. Tortoise populations have steadily declined within the Reserve since 1996, and likely throughout the County where take is authorized. As stated elsewhere, the Council believes that the entire Red Bluffs ACEC should be designated as a Reserve as a means to alleviate the imbalance that is already documented, and that this be done while denying the Northern Corridor.</p> <p>The Applicant is requesting take of more than 66,000 acres of occupied and potential tortoise habitat. To mitigate for this loss, the Applicant needs to identify other areas of tortoise habitat that, when acquired and enhanced, would contribute to the long-term management of the tortoise, in the Reserve and UVRRU. Partial mitigation to offset the impacts of taking 66,000+ acres would be for the Applicant to implement effective conservation actions within</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					critical habitat and in the Reserve to improve its ability to grow and sustain a viable tortoise population for future generations. Such conservation actions would include, but are not limited to, substantial improvements to habitat quality, especially the quality of nutritious forage (e.g., removal of non-native invasive plant species, establishment of native annual plant species), habitat restoration for burned areas in the Reserve, implementation of effective fire prevention and fire suppression plans that focus on the needs of the tortoise/tortoise habitat, implementation of effective local community and visitor education and law enforcement plans, implementation of tortoise exclusion fencing and human access exclusion fencing as identified from required compliance and effectiveness monitoring, reducing direct and indirect mortality from humans (e.g., crushing by vehicles, vandalism, collection, loss of tortoises from the effects of roads), closing unnecessary roads and restoring habitat, reducing predation from ravens, feral and roaming dogs, etc. As written, the 2020 HCP fails to provide for these actions and should be modified to do so.
68	ii	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “However, this Amended HCP does not expressly prohibit uses of the Reserve that are not Covered Activities.”</p> <p>Comment: This statement is referring to the Northern Corridor. The 1995 HCP makes it clear that new roads are not acceptable as it closed existing roads in the Reserve. P. 21 of the 1995 HCP says “The proposed reserve is consistent with that recommended in the DTRP [Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan], and its boundaries have been drawn with generally accepted reserve design criteria (see Chapter 7 for an in depth analysis of the reserve boundaries against these criteria).” Page 123 of the 1995 HCP says, “(7) Blocks of habitat that are roadless or otherwise inaccessible to humans are better than roaded and accessible habitat blocks. Unfortunately, there are few roadless areas of any size within desert tortoise habitat in the UVRU. To the maximum extent practicable, interior roads will be closed within the reserve boundaries. Paved highways such as Interstate 15, Highway 18, Snow Canyon Road, and Skyline Drive will remain open to vehicular traffic. Desert tortoise mortality along Highway 18, Interstate 15, and Skyline Drive will be minimized through fencing. The largest block of habitat which will remain roadless is within Zone 3 of the reserve which is between the Cottonwood Road, Interstate 15, the Dixie National Forest, and Red Cliffs, an area of approximately 28,147 acres. The next largest block is also within Zone 3, and it is between Highway 18 and the Cottonwood Road north of Skyline Drive, an area of approximately 10,155 acres.”</p> <p>Page 21 of the 1995 HCP further supports no new roads with the following information - “Zone 3 will be managed by</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>the Dixie Resource Area of the BLM for the preservation and enhancement of the Mojave desert tortoise.” “Grazing permits will be acquired and retired on a willing buyer/willing seller basis.” “Hiking, equestrian, and camping should be restricted to designated areas.” “BLM should ...apply for mineral withdrawal for Federal minerals.” “Vehicles should be restricted to designated roads.” “Continuation of present activities associated with the Moroni Feeds Turkey Farm should be permitted but new actions, which the reserve manager reasonably believes may harm the desert tortoise, should not be allowed.” “No organized or competitive sporting or recreational events should be allowed.” “From Skyline Drive, no general public access will be permitted into the reserve, except on designated trails.”</p> <p>If these activities are prohibited based on 1995 standards because of their impacts to the tortoise/tortoise habitat, why would a new freeway with major traffic be considered an acceptable activity in a wildlife reserve under current 2020 standards?</p>
69	ii	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Therefore, the implementation of this Amended HCP remains consistent with the analyses in the 1995 Environmental Impact Statement and 1996 Biological Opinion.”</p> <p>Comment: The Council contends that the declines in tortoise populations throughout the listed range of the Mojave Population of the Agassiz’s Desert Tortoise since 1995 (see Attachment D) constitute both an Unforeseen Circumstance and Changed Circumstance that are not being adequately addressed in the amended HCP; that the 1995 EIS does not adequately address the relationship between authorized impacts and a concomitant level of conservation because of these declines and failure of the HCAC to curtail fire, poaching, predation, and other deleterious impacts within the Reserve; and that “...substantial new analysis of the impacts of the reauthorized take...” IS warranted, contrary to the assertion given in this section.</p>
70	ii	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Up to 200 acres of this take could be applied to Covered Activities inside the Reserve, subject to compliance with other conservation measures specified in this Amended HCP.”</p> <p>Comment: We have a few issues with the above statement. First, it is inconsistent with what the 2020 HCP says on page i, which is “A Renewed/Amended ITP is needed to extend the County’s access to previously authorized, but unrealized, incidental take of the MDT for an extended term of 25 years. Amendments to the 1995 HCP are needed to</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>incorporate developments in the best available science pertaining to the MDT, comply with current USFWS regulations pertaining to ITPs, incorporate current policy regarding amended HCPs (as applicable), and clarify the language to more accurately reflect the intent of the 1995 HCP. Excluding 200 acres to build use and maintain a highway is not an amendment that incorporates developments in the best available science pertaining to the MDT, comply with current USFWS regulations pertaining to ITPs, incorporate current policy regarding amended HCPs (as applicable), and clarify the language to more accurately reflect the intent of the 1995 HCP.” Language throughout the HCP must be consistent and be clear, unlike the example given above.</p> <p>Second, the Northern Corridor will impact more than 200 acres when direct and indirect impacts of the construction, use, and maintenance of the freeway are calculated. The impacts of the road effect zone are well documented for wildlife species with the behavioral characteristics of the desert tortoise. When added to the impacts of habitat and population fragmentation and eventual loss of tortoises south of the Northern Corridor because of small isolated population size and stochastic events, the area impacted by the activities of the Northern Corridor grows larger. <i>We provided this is information in our scoping comments, which do not appear to be addressed in the documents.</i></p> <p>Third, this new exclusion appears to be inconsistent with the legislation authorizing the creation of the Red Cliffs NCA. [see Public Law 111-11, Section 1974(e)(1)(a)]. Please explain how removing the 200 acres from conservation complies with this legislation.</p>
71	iii	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “This Amended HCP adopts, with clarifications, the same set of Covered Activities as the 1995 HCP.”</p> <p>Comment: Given the claim by this 2020 Amended HCP that the 1995 HCP did not expressly prohibit new roads, it seems prudent that the 2020 HCP should list Covered Activities allowed in the Reserve, and clearly state that “all other activities that do not contribute to the survival and recovery of the tortoise are prohibited in the Reserve.” Please revise the HCP to make this language clear.</p>
72	iii	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Therefore, the implementation of this Amended HCP remains consistent with the analyses in the 1995 Environmental Impact Statement and 1996 Biological Opinion.” “[S]ubstantial new analysis of the impacts of the reauthorized take is not warranted—the USFWS has already deemed the authorized take to be consistent with the</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>issuance criteria for an ITP.”</p> <p>Comment: The latter part of this statement is not true if applied to the current request for an amended ITP. It is not relevant for an ITP issued 24 years ago. The status of the tortoise, as for any species, changes over time. Because an entity determined in the past that specific actions could be implemented that would not jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species, adversely modify or destroy critical habitat, and would contribute to the conservation of listed species does not mean those specific actions would produce the same determination. Unfortunately, the status of the tortoise in this recovery unit, status of the tortoise rangewide, and the quality of available habitat including critical habitat are not the same as in 1995 and 1996 as they are now. Consequently, the analysis in the DEIS and BO should reflect these changes. The red, highlighted statement above should be removed from the HCP as it is not accurate.</p>
73	v	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The Amended HCP uses a Habitat Conservation Advisory Committee (HCAC) and a Technical Committee (TC) appointed by the Washington County Commission ...oversee and provide guidance on the implementation of the Washington County HCP. These committees provide adaptive management recommendations to the County, through the HCP Administrator, for addressing new information and uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of the conservation program.”</p> <p>Comment: The analyses and discussions given in the DEIS and Amended HCP should be based in science. This section did not say what happens to the recommendations or the process for implementing them. Please add this information. Otherwise from the information provided, it appears there is a lot of discussion but not much implementation of action to manage for the tortoise.</p> <p>In its Five-Point Policy (USFWS and NMFS 1998), USFWS requires the HCP include science-based effectiveness monitoring and adaptive management to determine if all aspects of the conservation program are functioning. We did not see the monitoring/adaptive management for fencing, law enforcement, community education and outreach, recreation management, tortoise translocation, and fire habitat management in the 2020 HCP. In addition, this monitoring/adaptive management would be required for the compensation land acquired to offset the 66,301 acres of occupied and potential desert tortoise habitat the Applicant is requesting to take. The Applicant should provide</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>assurances in the HCP that they will immediately modify the conservation actions when the effectiveness monitoring indicates an action is not producing the desired results. The Applicant should provide assurances in the HCP that they will take immediate corrective action if the results from compliance monitoring indicate compliance is not occurring. We stress immediate action because the Permittee has a history of not taking action to deal with tortoise predation (see St. George News October 25, 2019 “Efforts to control desert tortoise predation by ravens moving too slowly for some HCP committee members”).</p> <p>This Policy also requires compliance monitoring for all aspects of the Covered Activities. The HCP should include the methods and requirements for entities that will be implementing Covered Activities, how their actions will be documented, and how the locations and extent of habitat impacted will be mapped for tracking take of habitat. In addition, we have concerns about how the impacts of the taking of tortoise habitat will be determined as they frequently extend beyond the footprint of the Covered Activity.</p>
74	v	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The community goals and objectives address the County’s underlying purpose and need for continuing the implementation of the conservation program for a Renewed/Amended ITP Term.”</p> <p>Comment: This statement is incorrect. The County would continue to implement the conservation program even without an amended ITP Term. The conservation program does not disappear when the permit expires. As stated in a previous comment, the development is permanent so the conservation program must also be permanent. A 25-year conservation program provides little to no benefit to a long-lived species. This time encompasses just one generation for the tortoise. The tenets of conservation biology and population ecology show that multiple generations must benefit so the trend is positive. We refer the decisionmaker to USFWS (2011) that says, “Recovery Objective 3 (Habitat). Ensure that habitat within each recovery unit is protected and managed to support long-term viability of desert tortoise populations.” If “[t]he biological goals and objectives of this Amended HCP are consistent with the recommendations of the 2011 MDT Recovery Plan for the Upper Virgin River population of MDT, then implementation of conservation actions needs to continue until the rates of population change (λ) for desert tortoises are increasing (<i>i.e.</i>, $\lambda > 1$) over at least 25 years” and the “[d]istribution of desert tortoises throughout each tortoise conservation area is increasing over at least 25 years.” (USFWS 2011).</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
75	v	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The Reserve has been established and the majority of Reserve land acquisitions have been completed.... Regardless of acquisition status, the collaborative effort of the County and the HCP Partners has provided for the establishment, management and monitoring of the Reserve since approval of the 1995 HCP”</p> <p>Comment: Given the intent of the regulatory agencies to reverse previous opposition to the Northern Corridor within the Reserve, we object to the above statement as being intentionally misleading and not reflective of current plans under the umbrella of “Changed Circumstances.” Whereas these statements may be true prior to the 2020 reissuance of the ITP, in light of current plans, they will no longer apply after reissuance.</p>
76	v and 66-95	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “...the County and the HCP Partners have made substantial progress toward fully implementing the goals and objectives of the 1995 HCP.” According to the 2020 HCP (p.66), “The overarching intent of the Washington County HCP is to create a conservation program, compatible with the County’s community goals and objectives, for conserving the Upper Virgin River population of MDT in its native habitat in perpetuity [emphasis added]. The 1995 HCP identified several biological goals and objectives for the conservation program, restated with some modifications here as follows:</p> <p>“To the maximum extent practicable, conserve the Upper Virgin River population of MDT within the Plan Area by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meeting substantively the recovery recommendations for establishing the Upper Virgin River DWMA (i.e., the Reserve) contemplated in the 1994 and 2011 MDT Recovery Plans; • placing most lands within the Reserve under BLM or UDNR ownership, subject to willing partnerships with non-federal landowners; • managing the acquired lands within the Reserve in a manner consistent with the conservation missions of the BLM and UDNR, with enforcement of associated land use restrictions; • removing land uses from the Reserve that are not Covered Activities and that impact the MDT, such as land development, grazing, off-road use, mining, and others; • incentivizing the siting of Covered Activities in areas that are not MDT habitat or that are poor-quality MDT habitat through land use planning, impact fees, and environmental education; • translocating healthy MDT individuals from areas affected by Covered Activities to the Reserve, thereby minimizing the impacts of the Covered Activities on the MDT and expanding the protected MDT population; and

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>• monitoring MDT population trends and MDT threats in the Permit Area to support adaptive management actions.” Comment: For the second bullet above, this objective is unclear. We interpret it as the Applicants wanting to divest themselves of the expense and responsibility of managing the Reserve. BLM ownership is not acceptable as they have a very poor record of management in other places in the southwest deserts.</p> <p>For the third bullet above, “managing the acquired lands within the Reserve in a manner consistent with the conservation missions of the BLM and UDNR” we disagree with this objective. It should be reworded to say the acquired lands in the Reserve will be managed in a manner consistent with the 1994 and 2011 Mojave Desert Tortoise Recovery Plans and to conserve other listed and rare species in the Reserve including plant species and their habitats. BLM’s management mandate is multiple use, not conservation. The mission of UDNR does not include plants (https://wildlife.utah.gov/strategic-plan.html). In addition, it is limited to managing wildlife and does not specifically include managing habitat.</p> <p>For the fifth bullet, we disagree that incentivizing the location of Covered Activities in areas that are not MDT habitat or that are poor-quality MDT habitat should be limited to <u>only</u> land use planning, impact fees, and environmental education. This sentence should be reworded to allow for other means of providing incentives.</p> <p>For the sixth bullet, “translocating healthy MDT individuals from areas affected by Covered Activities to the Reserve,” this statement should be modified to say “translocating healthy MDT individuals from areas affected by Covered Activities to agency-approved locations.”</p> <p>In this section, it appears the Applicants are measuring the success of the HCP on how many actions have been implemented (e.g., acres acquired) rather than whether these actions have resulted in improvements to the status of the MDT [e.g., improvements in demographic data (numbers, density, reduced sources of mortality) and in habitat quantity, quality, and connectivity]. The data on tortoise and tortoise habitats tell whether the actions are successful. If they are not, adaptive management was to be implemented to modify these actions. Given the demographic data</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					that UDWR has collected on the tortoise in the Red Cliffs Reserve from 1999 to 2019, the data indicate the tortoise population has declined. We contend the HCP has not been accomplishing its goal with respect to the tortoise. We contend the HCP presents information that shows the HCAC has been following a checklist to complete actions rather than incorporating an analysis of the monitoring data and thereby using adaptive management to modify this list and implement actions that do contribute to conservation of the tortoise regarding demography and habitat. We argue that the 2020 HCP must be modified to address the declines in tortoise numbers and densities, recurring fires in the Reserve, and other impacts that were learned from monitoring and scientific research in the Plan Area. This would mean adding biological objectives, conservation actions, monitoring, adaptive management, and funding to cover these additional actions.
77	vi	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The establishment of the Reserve is the primary conservation measure of the 1995 HCP that offsets the impacts of incidental take caused by the Covered Activities” (emphasis added).</p> <p>Comment: As stated in numerous places and reiterated here, if the Reserve is the primary conservation measure, then the construction of the freeway through the Reserve compromises the entire conservation balance envisioned by the HCP. HCP Partners appear (now) to be advocating the freeway, which undermines the veracity of this statement.</p>
78	vi	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “This Amended HCP clarifies the intent of the 1995 HCP that the respective landowners or land management agencies have the responsibility for ensuring that the long-term management and use of Reserve lands is consistent with the goals and objectives and allowed uses of this Amended HCP.”</p> <p>Comment: This sentence is unclear. We are unsure whether it is directing land owners/manager to ensure that their land management plans are consistent with the goal and objectives of the HCP or that they are responsible for implementing and funding these goals and objectives. It should be the former. We request that this sentence be rewritten to say that the plans must be consistent with the HCP.</p>
79	vi	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “[T]he long-term management of the Reserve is supported by the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area (RCNCA) designation, the BLM RCNCA Record of Decision and Resource Management Plan, and UDNR’s MDT Management Plan for Snow Canyon State Park.”</p> <p>Comment: While this statement may be true now, these are management plans that can change at any time. They have no legal clout to require continued management of the Reserve. The BLM’s proposal to grant a ROW to</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					construct the Northern Corridor is one example of no guaranteed protection for the Reserve despite its designation as an NCA. Consequently, the HCP should include a legal designation on the lands in the Reserve, a conservation easement in perpetuity should be placed on these lands. This is one of many lessons learned from implementing the HCP since 1996 that should be modified in the Amended HCP
80	vii 86-88	Exec Sum 6.3.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “HCP Partners will, to the extent practicable, perform maintenance on Reserve fences within 60 days of notification of a maintenance issue.”</p> <p>Comment: Since the tortoise was listed in 1989, a 60-day notification has never been acceptable; repairs implemented as soon as possible should be the goal. Fence repair/replacement is likely an ongoing issue. The HCP partners should have equipment and supplies stored for fence repair/replacement and staff that can be assigned within a day to fix damage to desert tortoise exclusion fencing. This is one example of inadequate funding for implementation of the 2020 HCP.</p> <p>In addition, the Reserve Fencing section provides information on four types of fencing/barriers, total number of miles of fencing installed under the 1995 HCP, and a map of the land ownership of fencing. It does not provide a map delineating where each of the four types of fencing have been installed. Please add this information to an appropriate map in the HCP.</p> <p>The endowment fund for fence maintenance is an excellent idea and should be implemented.</p> <p>Given the recent accounts of tortoises killed by vehicle collisions in the Reserve, it would be helpful to provide data collected since 1996 on where vehicle collisions have occurred in the Reserve and what actions the HCAC took (adaptive management) to minimize these collisions. These data would indicate whether the current locations of fences are adequate or if additional fencing with shade structures need to be included as a conservation action with associated funding. The 2020 HCP should provide adequate funding for maintenance of all four types of fencing.</p>
81	vii 86-87	Exec Sum	NA	NA	Text: “Installation of new fencing within the Reserve or along the boundary of the Reserve is not currently contemplated by Washington County or the HCP Partners. If, through adaptive management, the installation of new

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
		6.3.2.1			<p>fencing is deemed a priority for achieving the biological goals and objectives of this Amended HCP, the landowner or management entity will be responsible for providing for the materials and labor for the installation and long-term maintenance of the fencing.”</p> <p>Comment: First, new fencing to exclude tortoises should also include the construction of tortoise shade structures (see Balduini 2018). Second, we do not understand the delegating of responsibility to the landowner. If this is a minimization or mitigation measure under the Applicants’ incidental take of the MDT, it should be the responsibility of the Applicants. To pay for it and ensure it is implemented. If not, it appears that the purpose of the HCP is to tell others what to do and hope they do it. Please clarify this statement.</p>
82	vii 88-89	Exec Sum 6.3.2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The BLM and UDWR will continue to be responsible for providing law enforcement within lands acquired for the Reserve. Law enforcement activities within the Reserve will focus on access and use regulations that implement the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve Public Use Plan, applicable BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs), and all laws and regulations (local, state, and federal) that pertain to the protection and conservation of threatened, endangered, candidate, and Utah sensitive species and their habitats.”</p> <p>Comment: As previously mentioned, these management plans can be changed so they allow for activities that are not compatible with the HCP/ITP. In addition, there is a patchwork of land ownership within the Reserve that makes effective law enforcement difficult. Consequently, there should be one set of rules for the Reserve, regardless of land ownership, that promote its conservation of the tortoise and its habitat.</p>
83	vii 88-89	Exec Sum 6.3.2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The County will continue to allocate existing resources from the Washington County Sheriff’s Office to provide law enforcement on unacquired lands within the Reserve boundary owned by SITLA or the Municipal Partners. The County estimates that an appropriate level of effort for this activity is approximately 20% of a full-time law enforcement position (i.e., approximately 416 hours per year).”</p> <p>Comment: In the 1995 HCP, two fulltime law enforcement officers were to be provided. Now existing staff from BLM, UDWR, and Sheriff’s Department provide LE with no information how much time they spend patrolling. We presume they receive no budgetary assistance from the HCP. If so, this is unacceptable. LE in BLM is woefully inadequate in a rural setting. The needs for LE adjacent to a growing city are even greater. This is another lesson learned from the past 24 years. The 1995 HCP presumed that two LE positions were sufficient. We assert that</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>calculating time on the job is grossly inadequate. There are 8,760 hours in a year. A Full Time Equivalent working for 52 weeks at 8 hours a week works 2080 hours a year. Subtract vacation time (average of 160 hours), sick time/injuries/doctor appointments (160 hours), mandatory training (100 hours), holidays (80 hours) leaves 1,580 hours or 197 days or 39 of 52 weeks of the year. Two people working is 3,160 hours in a year. If these two positions were dedicated full time to Law Enforcement of the Reserve, after vacation, sick leave, holidays, and training, their combined time would be 36 percent of the time in a year to enforce/educate the public on appropriate activities in the Reserve. This calculation assumes no backup or overlapping of time on duty and <u>assumes</u> that two people can adequately enforce the area.</p> <p>We consider this another lesson learned from the implementation of the 1995 HCP that should be applied to the 2020 HCP and requires additional effort and therefore spending. The number and severity of unauthorized activities in the Reserve with respect to the take of tortoises and the math calculations above indicate that law enforcement needs to be increased substantially. In addition, the area they must cover and the human activities in the Reserve during the past 24 years with their resulting adverse impacts to tortoises and habitat resulting in declining numbers since the ITP was issued supports the need for a substantial increase in law enforcement presence on the Reserve.</p>
84	viii 89-91	Exec Sum 6.3.2.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Planning and funding to construct a new Red Cliffs Visitor Center facility in Washington County, as contemplated in the 1995 HCP. This new facility may also serve as a holding facility for MDT awaiting translocation or adoption or may support a head-start program.”</p> <p>Comment: From this wording (i.e., “planning and funding to construct”) we presume that the Visitor Center Facility would not be built in the next 25 years. Please explain why the planning and funding of this facility would take so long. We contend planning should take a few years, and time/methods to acquire the funds is up to the HCAC and Washington County Commission. Funds could be acquired in as little as a few years; or better yet, some of the seven million dollars sitting in the bank should be used for immediate planning and construction. If it will not be implemented during the permit term, it should not be included in the HCP.</p>
85	viii 89-91	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The BLM and UDWR will also continue their respective programs for education and outreach regarding the MDT, other rare and sensitive resources, and the Mojave Desert ecosystem.”</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
		6.3.2.3			<p>Comment: On the BLM’s Red Cliffs National Conservation Area webpage (https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/utah/red-cliffs-nca), we found the following information on the tortoise: “Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, a multi-jurisdictional land base that has been collaboratively managed by BLM, the State of Utah, Washington County, and local municipalities since 1996 to protect populations and habitat of the threatened Mojave Desert tortoise.” We did find a link to the NCA’s congressional designation (P.L. 111-11), news stories (two on camping, one on land acquisition), links to the RMP, the Annual Manager Report for Fiscal Year 2016, a 1-page fact sheet that mentions the tortoise once, and link to the Doyle land acquisition on the eplanning website, dated August 30, 2016. We conclude that BLM has not updated it webpage since 2016; that, or nothing noteworthy regarding management of the NCA or land acquisition has occurred since 2016. In addition, there is a printable map, interactive map, brochure, and webpage on camping information. The brochure is titled “Red Cliffs Recreation Area” and (https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/documents/files/Red%20Cliffs%20Recreation%20Area_Brochure.pdf); there is no mention of the tortoise. It stresses recreation opportunities and camping/access fees in the NCA. Our point is the BLM does not appear to have a program, at least online, for education and outreach regarding the MDT at the Red Cliffs NCA. Consequently, we recommend that BLM add this requirement to its list of tasks in the Implementation Agreement with USFWS, UDWR, and HCAC review if the current wording of the HCP is to be correct. Because the Applicants cannot control what BLM or UDWR does, they should develop, fund, and implement a community education and outreach plan and not rely on federal or state agencies to do it for them. It should be reviewed by professionals who know who to communicate with and effectively inform the public of the conservation of the tortoise and how conserving it and its habitat provides an economic and environmental benefit to their community and indirectly contributes to improving their quality of life.</p>
86	ix 91-92	Exec Sum 6.3.2.4	NA	NA	<p>Text: “UDWR coordinates with the BLM and the County to release healthy MDT into the Reserve” and “The County’s, UDWR’s, and the BLM’s responsibility for the fate of translocated MDTs ceases once the MDTs are released into the Reserve or to another entity approved by the USFWS.”</p> <p>Comment: This language is confusing. The HCP should clearly state that translocated tortoises will only be released on lands secured for the management of the tortoise in perpetuity. This requires permanent conservations easement or other legal entitlements. We suggest that the HCP clarify what is meant by “the fate of the translocated tortoise.” The</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					fate of the habitat into which it is translocated should never be in question as it will be if the Northern Corridor is facilitated by this planning process.
87	ix 94	Exec Sum 6.3.2.7	NA	NA	Text: “The County will also engage in the adaptive management process contemplated in the Public Use Plan.” Comment: We are not sure what this means. It appears to be saying that the Public Use Plan which “provides the primary guidance for managing public recreation on lands in the Reserve” does not have an adaptive management requirement. If so, it does not meet the requirements of an HCP. This language should be changed to require implementation of adaptive management in the development, implementation, and/or monitoring of any plan that affects the ecological resources of the Reserve. If this language was in the 1995 HCP, it did not meet the requirements for permit issuance. Please change this language to require adaptive management.
88	x 94	Exec Sum 6.3.2.7	NA	NA	Text: “The County launched a Trail Stewards Program to recruit, train, and support qualified volunteers in monitoring trail conditions, conducting minor trail maintenance, providing visitor information, and reporting instances of vandalism and noncompliance with Reserve regulations. The County intends to continue this program for the Renewed/Amended ITP Term.” Comment: In addition, if the Applicants are unable to operate this program with volunteers, there should be provisions in the HCP to fund this program. In addition, the wording sounds like this program is part of the law enforcement program (e.g., “reporting vandalism and noncompliance with Reserve regulations.”) We presume these reports are submitted to law enforcement and the HCAC to be corrected ASAP (e.g., adaptive management).
89	x 95	Exec Sum 6.3.2.8	NA	NA	Text: “The County will establish an adaptive management fund to help support planning, monitoring, and responses for fire management within the Reserve boundary.” Comment: This is another example of unclear language. Please change this to say the County will fund actions to restore habitat in any area in the Reserve destroyed/damaged by fire regardless of the fire source. If the County and its partners had been managing the Reserve for tortoise, which also means managing the habitat, at the top of the list would have been management of nonnative plant species to substantially reduce their presence in the Reserve. Nonnative plant species fuel and carry fire in the Mojave Desert. Prior to their presence, large areas of fire or reoccurring fires were unknown in the Mojave Desert. Appendix D-2 of the HCP says “In 2018, wildfire continues to be one of the greatest threats to tortoise habitat.” We agree. This threat should be managed for in the HCP’s

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					biological goals, objectives, and conservation actions.
90	x 95	Exec Sum 6.3.2.8	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Reserve Habitat and Fire Management Plan [was] adopted by the HCAC in October 2019 to help set priorities for Reserve management during the Annual Work Plan process and to provide guidance to the County, the HCP Partners, and fire crews for addressing wildfire-related threats within the Reserve.”</p> <p>Comment: We support this action. However, Appendix D of the 2020 HCP says, “destructive wildfires...burned ~25% of the RCDR in 2005.” We do not understand why the HCAC took 23 years from issuance of the 1996 ITP and 14 years from the disastrous 2005 wildfires to develop this plan. This is another example of the HCAC not implementing adaptive management when a substantive threat was known, as there were fires earlier in the ITP term that had adverse impacts on the tortoise and tortoise habitat in the Reserve. For example, Appendix D of the HCP says, “In 2018, wildfire continues to be one of the greatest threats to tortoise habitat.” So, the threat has been known but the response has been lacking.</p>
91	x 96-98	Exec Sum 6.3.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “This committee process established by the 1995 HCP and coordinated by the County for the original ITP Term has proven highly successful at identifying and solving issues regarding the HCP’s conservation program.”</p> <p>Comment: We assert that the committee process has not been successful as the number and density of tortoises and acres of high quality habitat have declined since the ITP was issued in 1996 (please see Attachment B following these tables). We conclude that the adaptive management process is not working. It needs to integrate science (e.g., monitoring data about tortoise demographics and tortoise habitat quality, configuration, and quantity) to determine if the conservation actions are achieving the biological goals and objectives.</p>
92	x	Exec Sum	NA	NA	<p>Text: “This committee process established by the 1995 HCP and coordinated by the County for the original ITP Term has proven highly successful at identifying and solving issues regarding the HCP’s conservation program” (emphasis added).</p> <p>Comment: We feel that this statement is disingenuous in light of the active intent of the “committee process” to accommodate the Northern Corridor. It is also our understanding that ubiquitous wildfires (page 3-152 in Volume 2), persisting raven predation on tortoises (page 3-40 in Volume 2), proliferation of weed species (Map 3.2-2a in Appendix B), documented poaching of tortoises (referred to on page 3-36 in Volume 2 but incidences not documented in the DEIS), the injury and death of 146 tortoises crushed on existing roads inside the Reserve (page 3-</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					36 in Volume 2), and now active planning for the Northern Corridor are evidence that conservation is considerably less than “highly successful.” All of these impacts (many of which are not stochastic as stated on page x) have resulted in persisting tortoise declines, which is evidence that the HCP is not functioning as intended, and indeed, needs to be amended WITHOUT accommodating the Northern Corridor.
93	x	Exec Sum	NA	NA	Comment: The following statement in the Executive Summary on page x, “...the population of MDT within the Reserve appears to be relatively stable and robust” is totally unsupported by the data. Page 3-48 of Volume 2 of the DEIS states: “Within the Reserve, UDWR surveys between 1999 (3,404 Mojave desert tortoises) and 2020 (2,011 Mojave desert tortoises) show an overall decline of 41 percent (UDWR 2020).” Attachment B following these tables clearly shows consistent, persisting declines in tortoise numbers throughout the Plan Area. Page 3-55 of Volume 2 indicates that in just two years density estimates have fallen from 17.2 tortoises/km ² in 2017 down to 12.3 tortoises/km ² in 2019. Here, the Amended HCP indicates that as of 2017, tortoise densities were at 19.6 tortoises/km ² , and that they had been as high as 29.6 tortoises/km ² prior to 2005 fires. In light of these and other data, how can the HCP claim “stable and robust” populations relative to 1995 estimates? We find the one-sidedness of the Executive Summary to the Amended HCP that presents the “success” of previous implementation to be misleading and presumptuous, and in the case of tortoise densities and trends, simply wrong. We find the HCP to be biased towards lauding successes without focusing on persisting problems that are happening even in the absence of the planned-for Northern Corridor.
94	x	Exec Sum	NA	NA	Text: “Therefore, monitoring indicates that the conservation program of the Washington County HCP is effective, and ongoing funding by the County is no longer necessary to assess the basic efficacy of the conservation program” (emphasis added). Comment: Given previous observations, we are concerned with the accuracy of the above statement and the apparent intent to discontinue the County’s fiscal responsibilities to monitor ongoing efficacy of the HCP. We then read in the bullets that the County may, at its discretion, volunteer to provide monitoring here and there but it will be the responsibility of BLM and UNDR to provide funding and implement monitoring. As the entity seeking take authorization and responsible for implementing requisite HCP commitments, it appears that the permittee (Washington County) is claiming success of the HCP, so far, and relinquishing its responsibilities going forward. Is

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					this consistent with the Implementing Regulations of Section 10 of FESA?
95	xxvii	Glossary	NA	NA	<p>Text: “[HCAC] Oversees the administration of the Washington County HCP and advises the Washington County Commission on the interpretation of the HCP document.”</p> <p>Comment: This interpretation of the HCP should be a minor component of the HCAC’s duties if the HCP is written in clear language. We find this lack of clarity to be a major flaw in the revised 2020 HCP; specifically, its lack of clarity in describing biological objectives, conservation actions, monitoring, adaptive management, and funding render it deficient in numerous ways.</p>
96	2	1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The central conservation measure of the 1995 HCP was the creation of the 61,022-acre Reserve. The Reserve design was consistent with the criteria for the Upper Virgin River Desert Wildlife Management Area (DWMA) envisioned by the 1994 MDT Recovery Plan (USFWS 1994a:62–63; see discussion in Chapter 7.1.2 of the 1995 HCP).”</p> <p>Comment: Although it was prudent that this was a consideration in 1995, it is now imprudent that development of the Northern Corridor now compromises reserve design, which is no longer consistent with the 1994 Recovery Plan (USFWS 1994), which states: “Blocks of habitat that are roadless or otherwise inaccessible to humans are better than blocks containing roads and habitat blocks easily accessible to humans.” Not only are BLM, USFWS, the County, and their consultants now facilitating development of the Northern Corridor, they are taking the opportunity to construct adjacent trails thereby increasing the accessibility of the primary Reserve to humans.</p>
97	4	1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The County and the HCP Partners adopted a conservation program designed to promote conservation and recovery [emphasis added] of the MDT (ITP No. TE036719:2) and meet substantially the recovery goals for the MDT in the UVRU (1995 HCP:9, 120).”</p> <p>Comment: We contend that the County and HCP Partners have not achieved substantial progress toward promoting the conservation and recovery of the MDT in the UVRU or rangewide. This position is supported by the most recent data on tortoise demography and comparing it with data from before the ITP was issued. Please see McLuckie et al. 2018, which is summarized in Attachment B following these tables; Attachment D to these comments - Status of the Mojave Desert Tortoise (<i>Gopherus agassizii</i>) from USFWS 2015; and Allison and McLuckie 2018. Our conclusion is also supported by the acreage of tortoise habitat damaged/destroyed by fire in the Reserve during the permit term of</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the 1996 ITP.
98	5	1.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Namely, the Original ITP was identified as a renewable permit, the County applied for a renewal in advance of the original expiration date, the USFWS acknowledged receipt of the renewal application, and the County (as the permittee, in conjunction with those entities performing Covered Activities under its direct control) did not complete the Covered Activities before the expiration of the Original ITP, and the mitigation commitments prescribed under the 1995 HCP have kept pace with (actually exceeded) the takings.”</p> <p>Comment: However, the HCP Handbook says, “Revisions depend on how much of the originally Covered Activity has been completed, whether the mitigation has kept pace with impacts, or possibly if the status of covered species has changed. The effects of climate change, or other factors, may lead us to recommend new species or habitat surveys to identify potential HCP amendments.” We contend that the mitigation has not kept pace with the impacts as tortoise numbers and densities have declined, the status of the species has changed in the recovery unit and rangewide, and climate change has adversely affected habitat quality and quantity for the tortoise in the Plan area. In addition, the HCP fails to mention the numerous limitations that are listed in the USGS habitat model regarding its accuracy, including not considering habitat quality, land uses that degrade habitats and statements by scientists that in some of the identified habitat areas, tortoises did not occur (USFWS 2011).</p>
99	5	1.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Revisions depend on how much of the originally covered activity has been completed, whether the mitigation has kept pace with impacts, or possibly if the status of covered species has changed” (emphasis added) .</p> <p>Comment: With regards to the above statement for reasons to renew and amend HCPs, since 2004, the declining populations of tortoises throughout the listed range excepting the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit (Allison and McLuckie 2018) directly relates to the emphasized wording above. Table 6 on page 33 of the Amended HCP shows a 24.3% reduction in tortoise numbers in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unity. In California, declines in all recovery units within the state led to a 2019 petition by the Council, Defenders of Wildlife, and Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee to upgrade the State listing of <i>Gopherus agassizii</i> from threatened to endangered. Yet, counterintuitively, Utah field offices of the agencies are promoting development of the Northern Corridor through a local tortoise population that is already imperiled in the absence of the freeway while simultaneously providing for the elimination of tortoises from areas outside the Reserve in take areas throughout the County.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
100	5	1.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The Amended HCP includes revisions appropriate to address changes to the status of the listed species in the Plan Area and current regulatory requirements for ITPs” (emphasis added).</p> <p>Comment: Given the documented decline of 41% of tortoises within the Reserve (page 3-48 of Volume 2), how is the above statement accurate? Should not such a significant reduction be remedied by enhanced protections in the Amended HCP, and prohibit the construction of a freeway through the Reserve?</p>
101	6	1.3	NA	NA	<p>Comment: How can the Reserve be the “...central conservation measure of the 1995 HCP” (page 2) and the Amended HCP, which will accommodate the Northern Corridor under the guise of a Changed Circumstance, still claim the “...basic framework of the 1995 HCP has been preserved?” (page 6). Herein, we assert that the basic intended function of the Reserve is lost by constructing a freeway through its most dense tortoise concentrations. We also ask that the agencies address the perception that there is a conflict of interest in having Washington County serve both as a proponent of the Northern Corridor and managing partner in amending the HCP.</p>
102	9	1.5	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The fourth paragraph on page 9 refers to Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act but mixes the Act’s requirements with the Code of Federal regulations requirement. Whereas, Section 10 allows the Secretary of the Interior to issue an incidental take permit and to receive other such assurances, the CFRs require the USFWS to follow certain procedures to issue an ITP and these are mentioned in paragraph 5 of the HCP. Please correct this misinformation in the Amended HCP.</p>
103	NA	NA	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The HCP uses “Implementing Agreement” and “Implementation Agreement.” The use of more than one term for the same document is confusing. We request that the terms used in the HCP be consistent throughout the document.</p>
104	10	1.5	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The HCP Handbook also provides guidance regarding amendments and renewals for HCPs and ITPs (HCP Handbook:17-5).”</p> <p>Comment: Please change this to say HCP Handbook 17-4. Section 17.5 is “When Additional NEPA, Section 7, or NHPA Compliance Is Needed.”</p>
105	12	2.1	NA	2	<p>Comment: To provide clarity and avoid confusion, this table should state that these Covered Activities are located “outside the Reserve boundary.” This is in the narrative but not the table and is needed for clarity and consistency.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
106	12	2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “For example, the Covered Activities may include future otherwise lawful land uses that occur on lands under federal ownership at the outset of the Renewed/Amended ITP Term but that have become non-federal by the time the otherwise lawful land use occurs, such as may occur through land exchanges associated with Reserve land acquisitions or other BLM land sales or dispositions.”</p> <p>Comment: This wording is confusing, and is not an example. Does this mean if a permittee has grazing authorization on BLM land now and the land is transferred to the reserve under non-federal ownership, the permittee continues to have the right to graze this land? If this is correct, this is unacceptable and the grazing should not be allowed. Please clarify this language and provide an example. Any land placed in the Reserve should have a permanent conservation easement placed on it, as a minimum, so the land is managed for its intended purpose in the Reserve. If the loss of habitat is in perpetuity, the acquisition and management of habitat must be in perpetuity.</p>
107	12	1.2	1	NA	<p>Comment: According to the HCP Handbook (USFWS and NMFS 2016) “The permit area must be clearly delineated with a map and written description in the HCP and the permit. The written description may include township, range, and section information; plat map and parcel numbers; global positioning system (GPS) coordinates; legal descriptions; or whatever is necessary to ensure that there is no uncertainty as to where Covered Activities may occur and take is authorized.” We were unable to find a legal description of the permit area or a map/figure that clearly delineates the permit area. While Figure 1 shows the County boundary for the Plan Area, the permit area is smaller. The western boundary of the permit area cannot be determined from the figure provided. Please add a map of the permit area that clearly shows which lands near the western border are in the permit area and which lands are outside.</p>
108	12-13	2.2	NA	2	<p>Comment: There is no table listing Covered Activities <i>inside</i> the Reserve. Please add this table so it corresponds to the Table 2 of Covered Activities <i>outside</i> the Reserve, clearly label the title of the table as “Covered Activities inside the Reserve,” and include a list of non-covered activities inside the Reserve. This is needed for clarity and allows the comparison of activities inside and outside to Reserve to better determine the completeness and clarity of the tables.</p>
109	13-14	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: All Covered Activities that are likely to occur inside the Reserve that will benefit the tortoise but may result in take should be included in this section. This information must be complete for the USFWS to analyze these impacts and to provide incidental take coverage. This would include types of activities for habitat management (e.g., reduction of invasive plant species – hand pulling, backpack herbicide spraying, etc.), fire prevention, and fire</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					suppression methods, habitat restoration methods, trail maintenance methods, etc. and equipment that would be used. Failure to do so would result in amending the HCP and prolonging the authorization process for these activities to be implemented to help with conserving the MDT. Please ensure all Covered Activities inside the Reserve are described.
110	13	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The County has direct control over these activities when performed directly by the County, through agreements with the HCP Partners and Municipal Partners, and through the issuance of permits or other legal mechanisms, as applicable.”</p> <p>Comment: Please add that when they are partially or completely funded by the County, the County has direct control over these activities.</p>
111	13	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Infrastructure facilities, as contemplated herein, include the temporary and permanent ROWs or workspaces and the physical structures associated with such facilities.”</p> <p>Comment: This paragraph should clarify if this applies to existing ROWs or anticipates that additional ROWs will be needed and granted. It should clarify that a road is authorized only for the use of the utility and not for public use.</p>
112	14	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Zone-specific allowed uses: This Amended HCP clarifies that the following zone-specific allowed uses are Covered Activities when performed in accordance with the conservation measures specified in Chapter 6. Reserve Zones 4 and 5 do not have zone-specific allowed uses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Reserve Zone 1: Low-density residential development limited to a maximum overall density of one unit per acre with minimized surface disturbance during development, retention of native vegetation, and restrictions on exotic plant materials. o Reserve Zone 2: Existing state and local government uses are Covered Activities, including, but not limited to, existing public recreational access and use of related facilities and various infrastructure facilities (e.g., detention basins, wells, utility access roads). o Reserve Zone 3: Existing state and local government uses are Covered Activities, including, but not limited to, the continued operation, use, and maintenance of facilities associated with the City of St. George law enforcement training range, the debris basin behind City Creek dam, Pioneer Park, and other various infrastructure facilities (e.g., detention basins, wells, utility access roads).” <p>Comment: This paragraph is not clear. Does “maximum overall density of one unit per acre with minimized surface</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>disturbance during development” mean a person can build a 10,000 square foot home, several outbuildings, and a paved driveway and patio occupying similar square footage? While we presume this is an extreme example, if it is permissible, then this would not be acceptable. The zoning requirements should be included in the HCP as they could be changed in the next 25 years. We recommend that the entire paved and/or graded surface should be less than 10 percent of a 1-acre parcel.</p> <p>We found no information on the types of businesses that may be conducted from a person’s residence in Zone 1. This information should be included in the HCP to determine if the activities associated with the business are acceptable for the biological goals and objectives of Zone 1.</p>
113	14	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Some activities specifically allowed within the Reserve under the 1995 HCP are no longer relevant to this Amended HCP and have been removed from the list of Covered Activities.”</p> <p>Comment: We found no list. We found a narrative. Lists allow comparison of activities/issues between sections of the HCP (e.g. Covered Activities outside the reserve and Covered Activities within the Reserve) and facilitate determining their completeness and clarity.</p>
114	14	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “For example, the 1995 HCP covered the continued operation of the Moroni Feeds Turkey Farm in Reserve Zone 3 (1995 HCP:32). However, the private lands associated with the former Moroni Feeds Turkey Farm in Reserve Zone 3 have been acquired for conservation purposes by UDWR, and the farming activity has been discontinued.”</p> <p>Comment: Because this is an amended HCP, it is crucial that all changes from the 1995 HCP to the 2020 HCP be clearly documented and described in the 2020 HCP in a table. Providing examples is helpful to explain a concept but not for providing clarity of information on all changes to Covered Activities inside the Reserve that no longer apply <u>and</u> why. Please add a table of Covered Activities inside the Reserve that no longer are applicable and why.</p>
115	14	2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Neither the 1995 HCP nor this Amended HCP expressly prohibit uses of the Reserve that are not Covered Activities.”</p> <p>Comment: Washington County is using the argument that because the 1995 HCP did not explicitly prohibit roads, new roads can be constructed and used in the Reserve and is excluding acreage from the Reserve boundary or a major new road in the Amended HCP. This is unacceptable. Providing information on activities that are allowed and not</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>allowed are equally important and should be listed and described in the Amended HCP. Regarding the example provided, while there may be lands inside the Reserve boundary that have not become part of the Reserve (e.g., private inholding lands, etc.), this does not prevent the Amended HCP from listing uses that are prohibited in the Reserve that are not Covered Activities. Providing no information provides no clarity for current and future land management including the purpose and intent of that management. Thus, to provide clarity, prohibited uses in the Reserve should be added to the HCP.</p> <p>Consequently, for all Zones in the Reserve, the HCP should include a list and description of activities that are not allowed in each zone in the Reserve in addition to Covered Activities. Activities not allowed should include new roads and modifications to existing roads that increase the footprint, frequency or type of use, or other factors that would adversely affect the tortoise and/or tortoise habitat. If this action had occurred in the 1995 HCP, we might not be in the current situation regarding the road issue (Northern Corridor freeway) through the Reserve because the 1995 HCP did not expressly prohibit new roads. This should be an example of applying adaptive management to the Amended HCP.</p> <p>When amending an HCP, the process requires examining what did not work in the original HCP and changing it in the Amended HCP to correct this (i.e., adaptive management), avoid continuing these mistakes into the future, and provide clarity. Any use or action that would result in disturbance to the soil or vegetation in the Reserve, unless it intended purpose is to benefit the tortoise and its habitat, should be prohibited unless it is a Covered Activity.</p>
116	15	2.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Collaboration is an important principle of this Amended HCP and achieving the biological goals and objectives of this Amended HCP requires the cooperation of multiple HCP Partners across many layers of government.”</p> <p>Comment: We agree. While the success of the Conservation Program and management of the Reserve depends on successful collaboration and timely implementation of it by all federal, state, and local partners, the federal and state Partners are not required to implement conservation actions. Please see Sections 7.C. and 8.E. of the Implementation Agreement. The first section says, “Effect of Federal Default - Failure to comply with or perform the applicable</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>commitment and requirements of this IA or the Amended HCP on the part of a Federal Party shall not result in the suspension or revocation of the New ITP as to any other Parties or any Certificate Holder that is in compliance with the requirements of this IA. Likewise, such a failure will not negatively affect the renewal, amendment, or any other type of extension sought by the applicant.” Thus, if the BLM does not implement its part of the Conservation Program for the Reserve, this failure would not affect the renewal of the permit. The second section says, “Availability of Funds - Implementation of this IA and the Amended HCP by the Parties is subject to the requirements of the federal Anti-Deficiency Act, the laws of the State of Utah, and the availability of appropriated funds from each Party respectively. The Anti-deficiency Act prohibits Federal agencies from incurring obligations or making expenditures (outlays) in excess amounts available in appropriations or funds (31 U.S.C. § 1341 (a)(1). Agencies of the State of Utah are likewise enjoined in Utah Code§ 63G-6a-1204 from entering into contracts or incurring obligations that commit funding beyond that appropriated. Therefore, Federal and state agency support of the conservation measures in the HCP is contingent on having sufficient funding over the term of the HCP.” We acknowledge a requirement to not overspend an appropriated budget. However, we also know that federal and state agencies are given much latitude in how they spend a portion of their budget. Thus, these laws are frequently used as a reason why actions did not happen, when it was a management decision rather than a lack of funds. Ultimately the IA appears to require nothing of the federal or state agencies unless specifically appropriated by their legislative bodies. Consequently, we are not sure what the purpose of the IA is other than to say this might happen.</p>
117	22	3.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The MDT is a large, herbivorous reptile that can live up to 80 years.”</p> <p>Comment: Please note the following studies. Curtin and others (2009) used skeletochronology and reported that the oldest western Mojave desert tortoise males reached 56 years compared with 27 years for females. In comparison, the oldest Sonoran desert tortoise males reached 47 to 54 years and the oldest Sonoran desert tortoise females reached 42 to 43 years, the latter significantly older than Mojave females. Medica and others (2012), in a 47-year study reported that the average age of long-term surviving tortoises was 43 years (range = 39–47 years). The lifespans described for tortoises in these studies were shorter than those previously assumed (e.g., up to 83 years) and may alter assumptions for population modeling and viability analyses. We suggest you update this information in the Amended HCP.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
118	23	3.2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The UVRU is the smallest Recovery Unit and is entirely contained within the County.”</p> <p>Comment: According to the 1994 Recovery Plan and Proposed Desert Wildlife Management Areas (DWMAs) (USFWS 1994), now called “Tortoise Conservation Areas,” the UVRU had an extremely high degree of threat. It had the highest density of tortoises estimated at up to 250 adults per square mile. However, it has only one DWMA [or Tortoise Conservation Area (TCA)]. The desert tortoise population is considerably smaller than that identified in the Recovery Plan as necessary to ensure an adequate probability of population persistence. However, a population of this size can persist if anthropogenic sources of desert tortoise mortality are strictly controlled. The current population has doubtlessly persisted primarily because rugged terrain and poor access discourages anthropogenic habitat destruction and direct sources of desert tortoise mortality. [Recovery Plan 1994 – “Preserving viable populations of desert tortoises within each of these units is essential to the long-term recovery, viability, and genetic diversity of the species.”]</p> <p>For the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit, the Recovery Plan says, “Develop reserve-level management within DWMAs” (emphasis added). “Because the factors causing the decline of the desert tortoise are primarily human-related, many human activities within DWMAs will need to be strictly regulated or eliminated.” These includes “eliminating burro, horse, and domestic livestock grazing; limiting vehicular access, including prohibiting new vehicular access and reducing existing access; and prohibiting new surface disturbances...” This information on management of this Recovery Unit and TCA should be included in the Amended HCP.</p>
119	27	3.2.3.2.1	3	NA	<p>Comment: We recommend that Figure 3, which depicts low, medium, high densities and potential tortoise occupied habitats relative to the larger permit and Plan Areas, be supplemented with a second map (perhaps Figure 3b) that shows these polygons within a map focused on the Reserve so that better resolution provides a better depiction of these areas. Zone 6 boundaries should also be added to this enlarged map, which we expect will demonstrate that all of Zone 6 is comprised of Low MDT densities.</p>
120	28-30	3.2.3.2.2 3.2.3.3	5	NA	<p>Text: “The USGS model quantifies the statistical probability of MDT habitat potential at a spatial resolution of 1 square kilometer (0.39 square mile), based on an analysis of 16 environmental data layers and MDT occurrences (Nussear et al. 2009). However, the scale of the USGS model is relatively coarse and the model does not account for</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>anthropogenic changes to the landscape, such as urban development (Nussear et al. 2009).”</p> <p>Comment: We have several concerns with the way the Nussear et al. (2009) report and potential habitat model for the desert tortoise are used in the 2020 HCP. We have described these concerns in an attached document (Attachment C). Paramount among these concerns is the dismissal of most of the limitations and assumptions the authors presented for assumptions made regarding ecological and behavioral differences, threats, population viability, and reserve design (e.g., habitat quality, habitat quantity, conformation of habitat blocks and edge effect, adequate connectivity between blocks of habitat, etc.). It appears that the 2020 HCP has disregarded most of these limitations and assumptions and used the results of the model as the foundation for the development of the HCP analysis. In addition, the figure (Figure 5 in the 2020 HCP) that maps “suitable tortoise habitat” does not agree with the map from USFWS (2019d) that shows contiguous high value habitat in the UVRU. We request that these concerns be addressed in the revision of the 2020 HCP and any documents used to support the HCP.</p> <p>The 2009 habitat model produced a map the indicated areas with tortoise habitat from 0.5 probability (i.e., 50 percent chance it is tortoise habitat and 50 percent chance it is not) to 0.99 probability. However, even with a 0.99 probability, Nussear et al. (2009) lists several limitations and assumptions regarding the accuracy of the model’s predictions. Among these are the absence of data throughout the range of the tortoise (e.g., climatic data), the need to interpolate data because of this absence, and modeled data for some environmental variables may be untested/incorrect, and the results were scaled to a coarse level (i.e. 1 square kilometer). In addition, we note the model used habitat parameters for both the Sonoran desert tortoise and Mojave desert tortoise. These and other limitations and assumptions render the map of modeled desert tortoise habitat in Nussear et al. (2009) unreliable in its accuracy.</p> <p>We suggest that models are only as accurate as the data used to develop them. They should be verified with statistically adequate ground-truthing throughout the area that they represent. For the 2020 HCP, this would be Washington County. In addition, a model is a tool among many tools to use to help answer a question; it should not be the only source of information for answering a question (e.g., determining occupied and potential habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise). We suggest that the new, revised 2020 HCP employ a more</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					recent model with finer spatial scale produced by Defenders of Wildlife modelling effort (Feinberg et al. 2019), which identifies less habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise in Washington County.
121	30-32	3.2.3.3 3.2.3.4	5	4	Comment: Please see our comments in Attachment B regarding the habitat estimates used in the 2020 HCP.
122	32	3.2.3.4	NA	NA	Text: “Based on the updated habitat modeling, approximately 40,000 acres of MDT Habitat within the Permit Area (15%) may have been lost to development activities between 1995 and 2019, with approximately 22,821 acres of loss occurring on non-federal lands outside of the Reserve (26%).” Comment: We interpret this to mean that of the 24,096 acres of occupied (12,264 acres) and potential (11,832 acres) tortoise habitat that was authorized for incidental take of the MDT in the 1996 ITP, 94.7 percent of this take occurred between 1996 and 2019. Consequently, there is little unrealized take of MDT as the 2020 HCP claims in Section 5.2.2.2 Amount of Renewed Take Authorization. In this section it requests the acreage where incidental take should be allowed to increase to 66,301 acres or almost a 30 percent increase. Where are the minimization and mitigation measures to offset this additional incidental take?
123	32-33	3.2.4.1.	NA	6	Comment: In 2018, the Beaver Dam Slope, Gold Butte, and Mormon Mesa Tortoise Conservation Areas in the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit were surveyed. All their density estimates declined from 6.2 to 5.1 adult tortoises per square kilometer, 2.7 to 2.3, and 6.4 to 3.6, respectively. Table 6 needs to be amended to include this information.
124	33	3.2.4.2.	NA	NA	Text: “Applying the USFWS’s estimated density of MDT outside of the Reserve (i.e., 1.3 MDT per square kilometer) to the MDT Habitat that occurs in the portion of the Plan Area that is outside of the Permit Area suggests that the current population of MDT in the Plan Area may be approximately 4,970 individuals.” Comment: While worded as a suggestion, we object to using a model of potential tortoise habitat with numerous limitations an assumptions to calculate the density of tortoises in the UVRU. This is an assumption built on an assumption. Please see our comments in Attachment B regarding the inappropriate way this habitat model is used throughout the 2020 HCP.
125	33	3.2.4.2	NA	NA	Text: “The USFWS estimates that the population of MDT within the UVRU (a geography that is analogous to the Permit Area for this Amended HCP) may be approximately 4,449 individuals. Approximately 2,401 MDT may occur

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>within the Reserve and 2,048 MDT may occur within the UVRRU outside the Reserve (Hilary Whitcomb, USFWS, personal communication to Amanda Aurora, SWCA, via email on May 14, 2020). The USFWS further estimates that the number of MDT occupying non-federal lands within the Permit Area but outside of the Reserve is 947 individuals.”</p> <p>Comment: Please provide information or a useable reference that indicates how the USFWS arrived at these calculations. A personal communication is not available to the public for review.</p>
126	33	3.2.4.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Applying the USFWS’s estimated density of MDT outside of the Reserve (i.e., 1.3 MDT per square kilometer) to the MDT Habitat that occurs in the portion of the Plan Area that is outside of the Permit Area...”</p> <p>Comment: Please see our comments in Attachment B regarding the inappropriate way this habitat model is used throughout the 2020 HCP.</p>
127	33	3.2.4.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “According to line-distance sampling efforts in 2017, Reserve Zones 2, 3, and 5 support approximately 19.6 adult MDT per square kilometer (36.7 per square mile) and 2,250 adult MDT (McLuckie et al. 2018). Prior to wildfires in 2005, densities were as high as 29.6 MDT per square kilometer. However, UDWR considers the population of MDT within the Reserve to have stabilized: there is no evidence of further declines in tortoise densities” (McLuckie et al. 2020).”</p> <p>Comment: McLuckie et al. (2020) also says “Although the population is considered stable, we have observed a localized decline of densities in Management Zone 3, the core of the Reserve (emphasis added). Tortoises in this area, particularly the west side of Cottonwood Rd, have declined significantly over the years. In 1994, mark recapture plots estimated 87 to 114 tortoises per mile² in the City Creek monitoring plot, a square mile plot located west of Cottonwood Spring Rd within Management Zone 3 (Fridell et al. 1995a; Fridell et al. 1995b). During the first several years of monitoring (1998 to 2001), tortoise densities were consistently high; however, following two [types of] stochastic events, drought and wildfire, tortoise densities decreased over 50%, from an estimated 3,351 adult tortoises in 2001 to 1,181 adults by 2019. Further, in 2019, we observed one of the lowest encounter rates recorded in Management Zone 3 since monitoring began in 1998.” In addition, the recent Turkey Farm Road and Cottonwood Trail fires that burned 12,000 and 3,000 acres, respectively, in the Reserve likely resulted in the loss of tortoises and tortoise habitat, as these are stochastic events similar to the fire reported by McLuckie et al. (2020) quoted above. We</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					have read reports of 20 to 25 percent of tortoise habitat in the Reserve has been affected by these recent fires. In addition, McLuckie et al (2020) says, “Wildfires in 2005 resulted in substantial losses of adult and juvenile tortoises, with observed mortality rates higher than all other monitoring years (1998 to 2019). The 2005 wildfires burned approximately 7,885 acres of tortoise habitat in the Reserve (~20%; McLuckie et al. 2007).” Thus, the data in the 2020 HCP indicating a stabilized tortoise population is not correct. Please revise the 2020 HCP to include correct this information.
128	34	3.2.5	NA	NA	<p>Comment: This section provides an overview of the threats to the MDT rangewide. This information is helpful. However, what is missing from the 2020 HCP is identification of the threats to the UVRU population of the MDT and their severity. The threats to the UVRU tortoise population may differ in type or intensity from the species as a whole. This information should be available from population surveys, other monitoring activities conducted in the Plan Area since 1996, and scientific literature derived from the area. This information on local threats and their severity is necessary to develop appropriate biological goals and objectives and conservation actions to implement in the 2020 HCP to reduce these threats to the MDT. Please add this information to this section. We note that Section 3.4.2 provides information on the MDT at a rangewide and UVRU population level.</p> <p>Given the decline in tortoise numbers and densities in the Reserve since 1996 (see Attachment B), we suggest this indicates that the Reserve is not being managed to strictly control anthropogenic sources of tortoise mortality (e.g., loss of nutritional forage from fires, failure to substantially reduce the presence of non-native invasive plant species, failure to restore habitat for the tortoise, failure to eliminate vehicle-caused mortality and injury (e.g., reports continue of tortoises being run over in Snow Canyon, etc.). All threats to the tortoise specifically known for the UVRU and the Reserve should be included in this section.</p>
129	34	3.2.5	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We find that the paragraph referencing USFWS statements about threats to be generalized and woefully inadequate. The DEIS provides, at least, the following information relative to documented threats: wildfires (page 3-152 in Volume 2), persisting raven depredation of tortoises (page 3-40 in Volume 2), proliferation of weed species (Map 3.2-2a in Appendix B), documented poaching of tortoises (referred to on page 3-36 in Volume 2 but not quantified), and the injury and death of 146 tortoises crushed on existing roads inside the Reserve (page 3-36 in</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					Volume 2). These are documented impacts that we believe show the inefficacy of the existing HCP to protect tortoises. These impacts are inadequately analyzed in the Amended HCP, and should be the basis for strengthening protection going forward.
130	39	4.2.4	NA	NA	<p>Text: “All of the ecological systems in the Reserve have a high departure from their natural range of variability due to the presence of nonnative grasses and forbs in burned and unburned areas (Provencher et al. 2011).”</p> <p>Comment: This statement indicates there has been a reduction in the quality of tortoise habitat including diversity and density of nutritious forage species. This has occurred because of the spread and proliferation of nonnative plants that outcompete native plants and the absence of management actions in the 1995 HCP (including implementation of adaptive management) to reduce the occurrence of nonnative plant species, which should be clarified in the revised Amended HCP going forward.</p>
131	44	5.1.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The Reserve has an extensive WUI, [wildland urban interface] as it borders private and municipal lands in the cities of St. George, Ivins, and Hurricane. However, much of the MDT Habitat on non-federal lands bordering the Reserve is degraded habitat already fragmented by roads and isolated by other developments.”</p> <p>Comment: This statement means that indirect impacts from this extensive WUI would be high and would necessitate buffer areas between the WUI and the Reserve for the Reserve to perform its conservation function. In addition, these areas would not be providing the habitat quality needed by the tortoise to survive and recover and could not be included as tortoise habitat in habitat calculations, which should be clarified in the revised Amended HCP going forward.</p>
132	44-51	5.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: In this section of the 2020 HCP, we did not find a discussion of the issue of invasive plant species previously identified in Section 4.2.2 of the HCP, how it affects the availability of tortoise forage quality, and ultimately the survival, growth, and reproduction of tortoises. This is only one aspect of the issue of habitat quality for the tortoise, which despite being identified as a major concern in Tracy et al. (2004) and the Revised Recovery Plan (USFWS 2011), is ignored in the 2020 HCP. In addition, this section does not address habitat quality despite it being identified in the Nussle et al. (2009) report as an issue that was not considered in the development of the model.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>Regarding invasive plant species, Jennings (2002) reported “the loss of these preferred plants due to habitat deterioration or invasive species would be quite detrimental.” “Given the lower digestibility and nutritional content of grasses compared with forbs and the potential for growth of juvenile tortoises to be limited in part by dietary nitrogen and phosphorus, a desirable management goal is to reduce biomass of less nutritious, invasive grasses such as <i>Schismus</i> spp. that contain lower nitrogen and produce phosphorus loss, and to maximize diversity and abundance of native plant diversity that includes forb species. This would help tortoises obtain high nutritional foods without additional time spent searching that would increase their vulnerability to predators and temperature extremes (Hazard et al. 2009, 2010). Decisions on habitat management should take both the quantity and quality of tortoise nutritional resources into account. Particular attention should be paid to factors affecting the distribution and abundance of plants high in potassium excretion potential (PEP) index, water, and protein (Ofstedal 2002). Alien <i>Schismus</i> spp. and other invading plants have poor nutritional quality for tortoises (Ofstedal 2002). When comparing annual forbs with annual grasses, forbs provided more energy, nutrients, and minerals (nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, and magnesium) to juvenile tortoises than did grasses. Forbs had less fiber and about five times more nitrogen than grasses. Juveniles gained weight rapidly (up to 0.5% of body mass added per day) when eating forbs. While eating grasses, tortoises lost body mass, shell volume, nitrogen, and phosphorus. Tortoises had a net loss of nitrogen and phosphorus on dry grass diets (Hazard et al. 2009, 2010).</p> <p>Thus, the nutritional quality of forage is important to the growth, survival, and reproduction of tortoises. This issue of reduced availability of native forbs because of competition from invasive annual grasses should be included in the 2020 HCP. Please add this adverse effect and information to this section of the 2020 HCP.</p>
133	44	5.1.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “...and other aspects of the built environment can fragment habitat and can have detrimental effects on MDT.”</p> <p>Comment: Please add to this section that not only the built environment, but also the non-built environments (e.g., large fires, other human-influenced actions that result in degraded habitat quality such that it can no long provide the life requisites for the tortoise.)</p>
134	44-51	5.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Whereas we appreciate the generalized review of the literature on impacts given in Section 5.1, we believe that the authors have failed to document the incidences of these general impacts as they specifically occur in</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the Reserve and Zone 6 areas, which then should drive enhanced protections. With regards to habitat fragmentation (Section 5.1.1), except for discussion on Cottonwood Road, what are the other fragmenting features within the Reserve as described on pages 3-34 through 3-37 in Volume 2 of the DEIS? Section 5.2.1 on Recreation fails to reveal the existing permitted recreational activities in the Reserve or would-be Zone 6, and fails to divulge the intent to maintain competitive events in Zone 6. The County has partnered with Northern Arizona University and more recently with Southern Utah University to conduct Human Impact Monitoring and assess/quantify recreational impacts on habitat (e.g. trail proliferation, illegal social trails, trail widening, etc.) for more than 5 years; why are the results of this monitoring effort in the Reserve not included in the HCP? Missing from Section 5.1.4: where were the 146 tortoises crushed within the Reserve and how will the HCP be amended to avoid further road-killed tortoises? We suspect that the documented loss of 28 tortoises to raven depredation between 2015 and 2019 (page 3-40 of Volume 2 of the DEIS) is a fraction of the actual raven depredation that has occurred, and appreciate that these and previous data are included in Section 5.1 of Amended HCP. In fact, the level of detail given in Section 5.1.6 should serve as a good example in amending the rest of Section 5.1. There should also be a new section added on poaching and vandalism within the Reserve, as there have been recent documented incidences of tortoises being removed from the Reserve (i.e., in a recent presentation by Ann McLuckie at a Council Symposium where the act was caught on a motion camera). With these as a few examples, we believe that Section 5.1 of the Amended HCP needs to be substantially modified to document actual impacts within the existing Reserve and the intended satellite reserve: particularly Sections 5.1.1 on fragmentation, 5.1.2 on recreation, 5.1.3 on grazing, 5.1.4 on both existing and planned-for utilities, 5.1.5 on road impacts, and 5.1.8, which fails to document the extent of fires in the Reserve.
135	44 & 89	5.1 6.3.1.3	NA	NA	Text: “The Covered Activities are described in Chapter 2. The Covered Activities may directly and/or indirectly affect MDT and can cause incidental take in the form of kill, wound, or harm.” Comment: Please add “harass” to the forms of incidental take.
136	45-46	5.1.2	NA	NA	Comment: Because this section of the 2020 HCP is describing Incidental Take and adverse effects to the tortoise and its habitat, we suggest that the last paragraph in Section 5.1.2 (page 46) be moved to Chapter 6. Conservation Program.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
137	46-47	5.1.4	NA	NA	Comment: This section provides several threats to the tortoise with few citations. Please add citations to support this information.
138	46-47	5.1.4	NA	NA	Comment: As per Comment 134 above, we ask that specific information be provided relative to the Reserve, and that they be mapped (see Comment 62 above).
139	47-48	5.1.5	NA	NA	Comment: Another impact of roads that is briefly touched on in this section is fire. Brooks and Matchett (2006) reported that between 1980 and 2004 in the Mojave Desert, the largest amount of area burned occurred in the northeast and eastern Mojave Desert. Human-caused fires prevailed in the low and middle elevations. Since the early 1990s the trend has been for more area burned by these fires in the middle elevation shrubland zone, middle elevation shrublands dominated by creosote bush (<i>Larrea tridentata</i>), Joshua tree (<i>Yucca brevifolia</i>), and/or blackbrush (<i>Coleogyne ramossissima</i>), where most of the fires occurred between 1980 and 2004. This zone is more susceptible than other areas of the Mojave Desert to increased fire size following years of high rainfall. Increases in fire size are likely related to the flush of non-native annual grasses, <i>Bromus rubens</i> in particular, that produces continuous fuel beds following years of high rainfall. Car fires along roadside are frequent causes of fires in the Mojave Desert. Native fuels in the middle elevation zone [includes the UVRU] appear to be just below the threshold of allowing fire to spread. This indicates the need to reduce the presence of nonnative annual plants that provide fuel to carry fires and to reduce or eliminate the presence of vehicles, whenever possible in the Reserve. Please include these adverse effects in this section of the 2020 HCP.
140	48-49	5.1.6	NA	NA	Comment: This section on predation does not mention road kill as a subsidized source of food for ravens. Please add this to this section.
141	48	5.1.6	NA	NA	Text: “While raven predation in the Reserve has been occurring for many years (i.e., in 1997, nearly 34 MDT carcasses were observed in Reserve Zone 5 near a single raven roost site), data has only been consistently gathered since 2015 (Schijf et al. 2018).” Comment: This statement says that adaptive management has not been working very well in the implementation of the 1995 HCP. This deficiency needs to be addressed in the 2020 HCP.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
142	51	5.1.8	NA	NA	Comment: This section mentions several actions that could be implemented to reduce the likelihood of fire ignition and transmission. Because this section of the 2020 HCP is describing incidental take and adverse effects to the tortoise and its habitat, we suggest that this entire section on Fire Management be moved to Chapter 6. Conservation Program. We request that information on the adverse effects to the tortoise/tortoise habitat from implementation of fire prevention and fire suppression (e.g., use of fire retardant that promotes the growth on non-native invasive plant species) activities by the non-Federal partners be added to this section.
143	51	5.2	NA	NA	Text: “The County has applied for the Renewed/Amended ITP to extend time wherein the County and others under the County’s direct control may continue to access the previously authorized, but as yet unutilized incidental take.” Comment: While this is true, it is only part of the truth. USFWS has granted an extension of the 1996 ITP while the County diligently works to complete its application for a Renewed/Amended ITP. We request that planning information since the 2016 extension be documented in this section of the 2020 HCP. Who participated and what were the major decisions made during the extended period of take authorization?
144	51	5.2	NA	NA	Comment: We request that this section be modified to fully document why it has taken from 2016 to 2020 to revise the HCP and reissue the ITP. Except for the 20-year time period of the 1996 ITP, there appears to be no other compelling reason to revise the HCP and reissue the ITP (i.e., ostensibly, 912 tortoises may still be taken and 66,301 acres may still be developed under the current authorization), except that the County now wants to develop the Northern Corridor and it has taken these last four years in the interim for agencies and their consultants to devise a compromise that redesignates Zone 6 as a conservation area with no relatable documented economic or planning impacts to Washington County (except that SITLA lands may not be sold and subsequently developed to the benefit of the County’s tax base).
145	51-52	5.2.1.1	NA	9	Text: “The County estimates that 257 MDT individuals should be appropriately characterized as taken by the Covered Activities.” Comment: We found no information on how this number was calculated. In fact, a knowledgeable biologist in the area has reported that more than 500 tortoises have been translocated under authority of the ITP, which does not even include the tortoises removed that tested positive for Upper Respiratory Tract Disease. In its annual reports, Washington County should have been reporting to the USFWS the number of tortoises incidentally taken through

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>implementation of Covered Activities. We request that this information be provided in the 2020 HCP to support the level of incidental take that is claimed in this section. If not available, it seems that Washington County did not take its responsibilities seriously under its 1996 ITP as that permit required Washington County report annually the amount of incidental take and to implement the 1995 HCP, which says, “6.2.3 Habitat Conservation Advisory Committee (HCAC)” “They will direct the activities of the administrator and review and approve the annual work plan and quarterly and annual reports on the quantity of take and mitigation implemented prior to submission of the documents to the County Commission. All deficiencies in the reports identified by the HCAC will be corrected or completed by the HCP administrator.”</p> <p>Similarly, Section 6.3.2 of the HCP requires “The following information will be included in each quarterly report: Clearances Requested: Owner, Number of Acres, Legal Description, General Location. Surveys Conducted: Owner, Number of Acres, Results, Who Conducted Survey. Audits Performed by UDWR: Owner, Number of Acres, Person Conducting Survey, Discrepancies Noted. Removals Conducted: Owner, Acres, Number of Passes, Number of Desert Tortoises Expected, Number of Desert Tortoises Removed. Law Enforcement: Report by UDWR and BLM.”</p> <p>In addition, the 2020 HCP says, “Take of individuals collected and processed for recovery purposes was authorized by UDWR’s recovery permit and other Section 6 agreements with the USFWS.” This process requires annual reporting to the USFWS of the number of individual tortoise taken. Also see p. 55 of the 2020 HCP, which says, “these MDT will be reported separately from the MDT incidentally taken by Covered Activities in the Annual Reports to the USFWS and the HCP Partners.” Thus, the data on incidental take subject to the Covered Activities of the HCP should be available. Please provide this information in this section of the HCP. If it is not available, then it appears that Washington County is not in compliance with its 1995 HCP and 1996 ITP. If so, the County would not be able to renew and amend the 1996 ITP as USFWS should have rescinded the ITP. 50 CFR 13.21(c)(4) says, “(4) The failure to submit timely, accurate, or valid reports as required may disqualify such person from receiving or</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					exercising the privileges of a permit as long as the deficiency exists.”
146	51-53	5.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Based on the updated habitat modeling, approximately 40,000 acres of MDT Habitat within the Permit Area (15%) may have been lost to development activities between 1995 and 2019, with approximately 22,821 acres of loss occurring on non-federal lands outside of the Reserve (26%).”</p> <p>Comment: This latter figure would apply to the HCP. We note that Section 5.2.1 claims that because only a portion of the tortoises authorized for take were taken between 1996 and 2019, the remaining portion can still be taken through permit renewal. However, the Applicant wants to convert number of tortoises to acres of habitat as a surrogate. This conversion calculation ignores the specific language in the 1996 ITP that says “The Permittee is authorized to take (kill, harm, harass, etc. as defined in the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA) up to 1,169 desert tortoises (<i>Gopherus agassizii</i>) incidental to otherwise lawful activities including, but not limited to, grading or other earth-moving activities for construction and development projects on up to 12,264 acres of Mojave desert tortoise habitat on non-federal land in Washington County, Utah, and on all other non-federal land in Washington County outside the Beaver Dam Slope area designated as tortoise habitat on the date of this permit, as more fully described in the Permittee’s federal fish and wildlife permit application and the WCHCP.” This information is on Figure 1.1 of the 1995 HCP. Thus, this information must be carried forward to the 2020 HCP and this is the amount and location of incidental take that was authorized in the 1996 ITP. If the Applicant wants to request incidental take above this number of tortoises or in other areas that it now labels tortoise habitat that were not considered habitat in 1996, the Applicant must amend their application request to reflect this increase in incidental take and must minimize and mitigate to the maximum extent practicable this additional incidental take.</p>
147	52	5.2.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “In terms of the updated habitat modeling described in Chapter 3.2.3.2 (i.e., the updated take metric for this Amended HCP), the Covered Activities caused the loss of 16,037 acres of Occupied MDT Habitat and 6,785 acres of Potential MDT Habitat (together, 22,822 acres of MDT Habitat) from non-federal lands in the Permit Area.”</p> <p>Comment: As stated above in Comment 120, we have numerous issues with the way the model of potential desert tortoise habitat is used especially as a foundation for other assumptions, and the apparent dismissal of most limitations and assumptions (see also Attachment B).</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					The ITP is very specific as to what it authorizes. For loss of habitat, it authorizes the loss of “up to 12,264 acres of Mojave tortoise habitat on non-Federal land in Washington County, Utah and on all other non-federal land in Washington County, Utah outside the Beaver Dam Slope area designated as desert tortoise habitat on the date of this permit.” According to Table 10 of the 2020 HCP, this was 24,096 acres of occupied (12,264 acres) and potential (11,832 acres) tortoise habitat. We request this information be carried forward when the Permittee is showing the acres developed under the 1996 ITP and acres acquired by the Permittee under the 1996 ITP to provide history, for comparison between the two HCPs and transparency.
148	52	5.2.2	NA	NA	Text: “...which incorporates the current best available information about the distribution of MDT Habitat” Comment: Again, we affirm this is not correct. Please see our comments in Attachment B regarding the many assumptions and limitations that were ignored in mapping this habitat in the HCP, including threats and stressors to habitat and habitat quality, size, configuration, and connectivity.
149	53	5.2.2.1.1	NA	NA	Text: “Take arising from the Covered Activities may occur through directly killing or wounding individual MDT or through indirectly harming MDT by significantly altering MDT Habitat in ways that lead to actual death or injury of an individual MDT.” Comment: Please add “or harassing” after “harming” to the above statement in the 2020 HCP.
150	54	5.2.2.1.2	NA	NA	Text: “Tracking take of MDT in terms of the acres of MDT Habitat that is directly modified by Covered Activities is a surrogate metric with a rational link to the true number of taken individuals.” Comment: We strongly disagree with this statement. Take can occur from many indirect effects that do not affect the quality of habitat or that degrade but do not destroy habitat. As such, there should be a metric that is developed to calculate the amount of take from the Covered Activities that include these indirect effects that lead to incidental take, just as the HCP argues that the USFWS developed a metric for determining number of tortoises from tortoise detections during surveys. We request that the statement above be changed to say “directly or indirectly modified” and that an appropriate metric be developed to include indirect impacts from Covered Activities. The product of this metric would be larger than the footprint or direct impact of the Covered Activity.
151	54	5.2.2.1.3	NA	NA	Comment: We agree that the footprint of most authorized development projects is measurable. However, because something is easily measured does not make it the metric that accurately represent the amount of incidental take or

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>impacts of the incidental take. Please see Comment 150 regarding appropriate measurement or metric for indirect impacts that are likely to result in incidental take.</p> <p>In addition, some people develop projects without permits. Consequently, the example provided in the 2020 HCP in this section should additionally address how unpermitted development will be tracked in this metric, and what actions the Permittee will take to require the unpermitted activity complies with the HCP, or not.</p>
152	55	5.2.2.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The County requests the renewal of as yet unrealized incidental take of the MDT associated with the Covered Activities in an amount equivalent to the direct loss of up to 14,466 acres of Occupied MDT Habitat and 51,835 acres of Potential MDT Habitat within the Permit Area. These combined 66,301 acres represent the current extent of MDT Habitat occurring within the Permit Area, outside of the 2019 Reserve boundary.”</p> <p>Comment: If the acres authorized for development in 1996 were 12,264 acres, we are not sure how this is equivalent to direct loss of 14,466 acres of Occupied MDT Habitat and 51,835 acres of Potential MDT Habitat. Please explain the discrepancies in the figures between what the 1996 ITP said and what Washington County is now saying. In addition, we compare this with the 24,096 acres permitted in 1996. This is more than a doubling of acres in the loss of occupied/potential habitat with no new or substantial increase in minimization or mitigation to offset these new impacts during the next 25 years. If The Permittee is requesting this much take, the conservation plan should be much greater than provided in the 1995 HCP to offset this take and should be effective for the threats that the MDT faces today and in the foreseeable future. These are not necessarily the same in identification or intensity as those it faced in 1995.</p>
153	57	5.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The amount of MDT Habitat within the Reserve that may be permanently lost to Covered Activities will not exceed 200 acres over the duration of the Renewed/Amended ITP Term. Considering the estimated average annual loss of habitat from Covered Activities or similar activities on federal lands within the Reserve, approximately 50 acres of new habitat loss might be expected over the Renewed/Amended ITP Term.”</p> <p>Comment: We question why there would be any permanent loss. In examples provide in the section of past loss in the Reserve, these included “the County estimates that Covered Activities or similar activities on federal lands within the Reserve during the original ITP Term caused the permanent (or, in some cases, temporary) loss of approximately</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					40 to 50 acres of MDT Habitat. This equates to approximately 2 acres of habitat loss per year associated with new utility pole footings, utility access roads, trails, or recreation facilities.” There should be no new utility access roads in the Reserve. Utility pole footing, new trails and recreation facilities should not add up to 40 or 50 acres. Apparently, Washington County is aware of actions that would result in the loss of 50 acres, but is requesting 200 acres, presumably a <i>de facto</i> plan to accommodate the Northern Corridor. We request that information on specific actions/projects that would result in permanent loss be included in this section of the HCP. Again, we note that USFWS needs this information to analyze the adverse effects in their biological opinion on the issuance of the incidental take permit and in their NEPA document on permit issuance. In addition, we request that the entity responsible for the loss be required to place a permanent conservation easement on the habitat acquired as mitigation so its use cannot be changed in the future.
154	57	5.3	NA	NA	Text: “Conservation measures that address HCAC or TC recommendations for offsetting impacts to MDT taken by Covered Activities Inside the Reserve may include the following.... Case-by-case consideration for conservation credit generated by actions that ...prevent wildfire within the Reserve, control invasive species within the Reserve.” Comment: The Conservation Program should already be implementing and funding these actions in the HCP. Please ensure this is occurring along with areas adjacent to the Reserve.
155	57	5.3	NA	NA	Comment: We find it revealing that the DEIS consistently characterizes the No Action Alternative with the inability of the County to revise the HCP or USFWS to reissue the ITP; that unless the Northern Corridor is developed, the County cannot revise the HCP or solicit a new ITP. Yet, in the Amended HCP, on page 57, there is the misleading statement that the new take authorization will result in only 200 acres of new impacts, without acknowledging that the County will only consider reissuance of the ITP if the Northern Corridor is developed. It is revealed in Table 3.2-2 on page 3-12 of Volume 2 that the action alternatives will have the following impacts: 266 acres for the T-Bone alternative, 240 acres for UDOT alternative, and 286 acres for the southern alternative. Since the environmental documentation inextricably links reissuance of the ITP with development of the Northern Corridor (hence the real reason for the four-year delay since reissuance), isn’t it misleading that this section claims that only 50 of the authorized 200 acres inside the Reserve will be developed, when it should reveal that, <i>but for</i> the Northern Corridor, there would be no immediate impacts? And, that the baseline for the impact will be at least 240 acres developed

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					within the Reserve within the next few years as the result of permit reissuance? That, whereas only 40-to-50 acres have been developed in a dispersed pattern over the past 24 years (top of page 57; and see Figure 10 on page 59), 240 acres within the main conservation area will be developed in the immediate future within a 600-foot wide ROW within the next few years as the direct result of permit issuance?
156	60	5.4	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Therefore, the implementation of this Amended HCP remains consistent with the analysis in the 1996 Biological Opinion (USFWS) 1996) and 1995 Environmental Impact Statement (USFWS 1995).”</p> <p>Comment: For the same reasons given in the previous comment, we disagree with the above statement. The agencies and County have devised a nexus, unique to the 2020 analysis and nonexistent in 1995-1996, that predisposes development of the Northern Corridor, which was not foreseen in the 1996 biological opinion or 1995 EIS, and therefore negates the applicability of these two documents <i>because</i> the Northern Corridor is linked to reissuance of the ITP in such a way that both must happen. As asserted above, there is no justification that the BLM’s No Action Alternative must be characterized with inability to revise the HCP or reissue the ITP. We construe the agencies failure to analyze an alternative that denies the Northern Corridor while providing for reissuance of the ITP has fatally flawed tortoise conservation while guaranteeing a freeway through the heart of the Reserve, which can no longer function as the foundation of the HCP/ITP, and is not mitigated by redesignation of a noncontiguous, satellite reserve.</p>
157	60	5.4	NA	NA	<p>Comment: To be accurate about the intent of the County and agencies to accommodate the freeway, the following statement on page 60 should be modified with the following bold-font text: “However, some of the underlying information associated with the analyses in the 1996 Biological Opinion and 1995 Environmental Impact Statement has changed over time...This updated information includes the duration over which incidental take would occur, the amount and extent of MDT Habitat in the Plan Area, and the estimates of MDT density and abundance within the Reserve, and the Reserve will no longer be maintained as an intact, unfragmented conservation area due to development of the Northern Corridor.”</p>
158	60	5.4	NA	NA	<p>Text: “...the implementation of this Amended HCP remains consistent with the analysis in the 1996 Biological Opinion (USFWS 1996) and 1995 Environmental Impact Statement (USFWS 1995).”</p> <p>Comment: While Washington County may make this claim, it is not true. Since 1996, new information has been collected on the status of the tortoise and threats to the species, and needs for survival and ultimately recovery. This</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					new information must be used in the USFWS' documents when considering permit issuance, including the biological opinion, findings document, and NEPA document. Because this statement is not correct, we request that it be removed from the HCP.
159	60	5.4	NA	NA	<p>Text: "In consideration of the No Surprises assurances provided to ITP permittees, substantial new analysis of the impacts of the reauthorized take is not warranted—the USFWS has already determined the authorized take to be consistent with the issuance criteria for an ITP."</p> <p>Comment: The No Surprises assurances rule was adopted by the USFWS in 1998 [63 Federal Register (35) 8859-8873]. The existing ITP was issued in 1996, consequently, this assurance has not yet been provided to Washington County. With the issuance of an amended permit by the USFWS, the No Surprises assurances would be in effect. Consequently, we request that this inaccurate wording be removed from the HCP.</p>
160	60	5.4	NA	NA	<p>Text: "However, some of the underlying information associated with the analyses in the 1996 Biological Opinion and 1995 Environmental Impact Statement has changed over time in ways that could affect the USFWS's analysis of the impacts of the reauthorized take against the jeopardy and destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat standards related to ITP issuance."</p> <p>Comment: We agree with this statement. However, it is only one part of the analysis process. USFWS' analysis is for the population in the recovery unit and critical habitat unit, as well as a rangewide analysis. Consequently, the HCP should provide information on the status and trend of the Mojave desert tortoise throughout its range to assist the USFWS in its analysis. Please provide this information in the HCP.</p>
161	61	5.4.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: "The updated modeling relies on both the original surveys, more recent MDT observations, and the range wide USGS habitat model (as modified for the UVRU)."</p> <p>Comment: We reiterate the problems with the updated habitat mapping given in Comment 120. Please see Attachment B for these concerns regarding its accuracy. The updated model ignores limitations and assumptions in the model's report and fails to consider information. This updated model serves as the foundation for the HCP's incidental take limit, areas identified for this take, and Conservation Program. Because the updated model is seriously flawed, everything in the HCP that refers to it is flawed.</p>
162	62	5.4.2	NA	10	Comment: Please see Comment 120 and others regarding the figures used in Table 10 to update habitat modeling.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
163	62-63	5.4.3	NA	NA	Comment: On page 62, high, medium, and low tortoise densities are given per square mile, whereas on page 63, tortoise densities are reported in square kilometers. We request that this section (and all others) be modified to reveal consistency between the units being used (e.g., either square miles OR square kilometers).
164	63	5.4.3	NA	NA	Comment: We note on page 63 that the highest tortoise densities within the Reserve in 2017 are given as 22.5 tortoises/km ² , which equates to 234 tortoises/mi ² . However, we note the following data given on page 3-55 of Volume 2 of the DEIS: “ Surveys conducted in Zone 3 during 2017 resulted in a density estimate of 17.2 Mojave desert tortoises per square kilometer ... 2019 surveys of Zone 3 resulted in a density estimate of 12.3 animals per square kilometer. ” Please explain the discrepancy among these data. Also, it is our understanding that a 2020 monitoring report is now available, is not included in your analysis, and should be included in the Final EIS.
165	63	5.4.3	NA	NA	Comment: We note the following, similar statement on page 63: “ The best available information indicates that the present average density of MDT within the Reserve is 19.6 MDT per square kilometer (McLuckie et al. 2018). ” Don’t the most recent data available to the authors, from 2019, show that the average density is now at 12.3? (Keeping in mind, as given above, that the 2020 monitoring data need to be added). Though not clearly divulged in the DEIS, the results from these data are very misleading as they rely on a preconstruction survey technique designed by USFWS compared to earlier distance sampling census techniques. The USFWS (2019a) technique is developed to estimate abundance prior to construction projects (not to estimate regional density) and surveys were conducted by individuals with minimal training. It is very misleading to compare the numbers estimated for this project to regional densities, which rely on two different techniques. We ask that the data derived from regional distance sampling methods versus project-impact estimation methods be compared in the Final EIS with a discussion of the relevancy (and irrelevancy) of comparing differing results.
166	63	5.4.3	3	NA	Text: “ However, survey data for approximately 5,150 acres of land contained within the proposed Reserve Zone 6 (see Chapter 9.1.1.1) demonstrates that the density of MDT in this area rivals that of the Reserve (i.e., approximately 22.5 MDT per square kilometer, see Rognan et al. 2017). ” Comment: The above statement is not consistent with information presented in Figure 3 of the Amended HCP, which shows all of Zone 6 as being Low Density MDT Habitat. Please explain this apparent discrepancy. We believe this section would benefit from a map that shows 1995 estimated densities compared to 2019 estimated densities.

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
167	63	5.4.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The USFWS approximates the present average density of MDT outside the Reserve as 1.3 MDT per square kilometer, based on the estimated density of MDT in the adjacent Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit (Laura Romin, USFWS, personal communication, to Amanda Aurora, SWCA, via email on April 23, 2020).”</p> <p>Comment: According to the USFWS Desert Tortoise Recovery Office (2019), the current estimated density of adult desert tortoises per square kilometer in the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Units is 5.1 for the Beaver Dam Slope, 2.3 for Gold Butte-Pakoon, and 3.6 for Mormon Mesa. Consequently, we request that the HCP update its information. [USFWS. 2019. Range-Wide Monitoring of the Mojave Desert Tortoise (<i>Gopherus agassizii</i>): 2018 Annual Reporting. Prepared by Linda Allison Desert Tortoise Monitoring Coordinator. US Fish and Wildlife Service, June 2019.]</p> <p>https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/documents/reports/2020/2019_DRAFT_RangewideMojaveDesertTortoiseMonitoring.pdf</p>
168	63	5.4.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The 1995 HCP estimated the abundance of MDT in the Plan Area as 7,883 adult individuals.”</p> <p>Comment: Table 2.1 of the 1995 HCP says “Estimated Desert Tortoise Habitat Acreage and Number of Animals in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit.” The total number of animals was given as 7,883. Please correct the wording in the 2020 HCP to indicate the 7,883 animals is for <i>all</i> tortoises, not only adults.</p>
169	65	6.1.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: It is not appropriate to place this section under Section 6.1 Conservation Program Goals and Objectives. Growing the human population and development of Washington County is not part of the conservation program. The HCP uses the argument “But for the attainment of these community goals and objectives [of growth and development], the progress toward meeting the biological goals and objectives would not be possible.” We contend that the growing human populations and its impacts on the tortoise and its habitat are the reasons why the tortoise is in trouble and needs a conservation program for it to survive. Because this section explains why there is a need for an amended HCP and ITP, please move this information to the appropriate section in Chapter 1, the usual location for Purpose and Need explanations.</p>
170	66	6.1.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The County also intends for this Amended HCP to respond to the proposed Northern Corridor. Although not a Covered Activity, the proposed Northern Corridor has been identified as an important piece of local infrastructure in transportation planning documents since the mid-1980s (Washington County 2012), and federal consideration for a</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>Northern Corridor across the RCNCA is mandated in the 2009 Omnibus Public Lands Bill (Public Law 111-11)."</p> <p>Comment: In reading Public Law 111-1, we found no language that says that federal consideration for a Northern Corridor across the RCNA is mandated. What we did find was that Section 1974 (e)(3) says, "(3) MOTORIZED VEHICLES.—Except in cases in which motorized vehicles are needed for administrative purposes, or to respond to an emergency, the use of motorized vehicles in the National Conservation Area shall be permitted only on roads designated by the management plan for the use of motorized vehicles; and in developing the current management plan for the (2009 legislation mandated the management plan be completed by 2012) the Secretary may incorporate any provision of (A) the habitat conservation plan; (B) the resource management plan; and (C) the public use ion 1977(b)(2)(A)plan." Section 1977(b)(2)(A) says, "identify 1 or more alternatives for a northern transportation route in the County." Please revise the language in this paragraph of the HCP.</p>
171	66	6.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: In reading the 1995 HCP, we learned that there was one biological goal "to provide a mechanism to allow orderly growth and development in Washington County without further jeopardizing the status of Federally listed or candidate species, focusing on protection of the desert tortoise." It put community development before conservation as it used jeopardy as the standard rather than offsetting impacts. There were four objectives under this one goal – (1) Provide adequate protection for the desert tortoise by implementing aspects of the DTRP through the creation and management of the Upper Virgin River Desert Wildlife Management Area. (2) Provide protection for other listed and candidate species and their habitats. (3) Meet the growth and development needs of the County. And, (4) Create a framework within the County to deal with current and future listed species.</p> <p>However, the 2020 HCP says "The 1995 HCP identified several biological goals and objectives for the conservation program, restated with some modifications here..."</p> <p>We request that Section 6.2.1 be revised and include this information as presented in the 1995 HCP with no modifications or interpretations. We request this because the USFWS' HCP Handbook says, "it is important that the HCP, incidental take permit, and associated documents are written clearly so that future users can fully understand how to implement the HCP and to ensure it will meet the stated goals and objectives. Although all parties actively</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>developing the HCP may fully understand what is expected and anticipated, future responsible parties will only have what is written in the HCP, permit, and associated documents to guide them. Be mindful of the future when reviewing the draft HCP and its associated documents. If it is not clear, recommend revisions to clarify specific sections or to better explain the intent and rationale behind decisions or approaches.”</p> <p>The 2016 HCP Handbook says, “Developing the conservation strategy of HCPs will be framed around the tenets of Strategic Habitat Conservation (SHC)... that links actions to outcomes, with learning as an explicit objective of conservation actions.” This includes “developing a monitoring framework to measure results, developing an evaluation process to assess results, and outlining a systematic learning process to use what will be learned to improve future decisions.” This strategy and process would apply to the 2020 HCP to update the 1995 HCP. The learning process to improve future decisions should be applied to results of the 1995 HCP monitoring and new data about the Reserve and used in the development of the 2020 HCP. This thought process should be clearly described and in the 2020 HCP, thus connecting what was learned from the 1995 HCP to the modifications in the 2020 HCP. We request that this process be clearly described and suggest that tables be used to show this process (i.e., what did the 1995 HCP say, what was implemented, what were the results, what adaptive management was implemented because of monitoring results, what were those results, and what is being changed in the 2020 HCP, if anything, because of these lessons learned.</p> <p>The HCP Handbook also emphasizes the need to “clearly explain the chain of logic” in the decision-making process. Because the HCP is part of the decision-making process, we believe the HCP should clearly explain its chain of logic. We found this missing from much of the HCP. We found no “chain of logic” or “connecting the dots” in the 2020 HCP that linked the results from implementation of the 1995 HCP to what is proposed in the 2020 HCP. For example, the 1995 HCP committed to installing tortoise fencing. The 2020 HCP says these installations are considered complete. However, there are documented tortoise mortalities from vehicles in Snow Canyon as recently as spring 2020 because these roads are not fenced. We would conclude that ongoing but preventable mortality would be a threat that the HCP would address by implementing management actions and monitoring to assess its effectiveness</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>(e.g., constructing tortoise exclusion fencing and shade structures along this road would be appropriate or should, as a minimum, be considered and therefore mentioned in the 2020 HCP). Please add this chain of logic to the 2020 HCP. As another example, to provide continuity, between the goals and objectives in the two HCPs, the one goal and four objectives of the 1995 HCP should be stated, the goals and objectives of the 2020 HCP stated, and information provided that explain the changes.</p> <p>Because this is an amended HCP, the document should include the history of the 1995 HCP implementation and information on its effectiveness. To do this the 2020 HCP would provide information on the status/population density of the tortoise in the Reserve in 1995 and its numbers now. It would describe the threats to the tortoise in the Reserve that were identified in 1995 HCP and the current threats. Using these data, it would display the 1995 biological goals, objectives, and conservation actions to contribute to the recovery of the tortoise and analyze which conservation actions worked, which ones did not, and why. If tortoise densities and numbers increased since 1995 in the Reserve and threats remained the same, then the biological goals and objectives and conservation actions could remain the same. If tortoise densities and numbers decreased, then the biological goals and objectives and conservation actions would need to change as the 1995 HCP was not successful in its mission. To clearly and concisely show this information and its chain of logic/connecting the dots, we strongly request that the amended 2020 HCP be revised and include this information in a table.</p> <p>Implementing the HCP is a scientific process. The HCP should be developed using the best available scientific information. As it is implemented, there is monitoring to determine if the biological goals and objectives are being met. If they are not, the HCP requires that adaptive management be implemented to modify the conservation actions so the biological goals and objectives are met. This process is designed to provide efficient use of funds and accomplish the biological goals and objectives.</p> <p>We contend the 2020 HCP is emphasizing the conservation actions it completed, especially with respect to habitat acquisition. It has not provided monitoring information that shows that the biological goals and objectives are being</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>met; in fact, declining tortoise numbers and densities in the Reserve 1996 to 2019 show they are not being met. This information indicates that adaptive management is required, that is, the HCP needs to be revised substantially so that tortoise numbers and densities are increasing as development and loss of tortoises from this development occurs.</p> <p>From the lessons learned from implementing the 1995 HCP, we believe the biological goals for the tortoise should include improving tortoise demographics in the Reserve (e.g., increase tortoise numbers and densities, demonstrate reproduction and recruitment on a regular basis from data on non-adult size classes, and demonstrate a decrease in mortality and disease); (2) improve connectivity (e.g., between tortoises within the Reserve, within the UVRU, and between the UVRU and Northeast Mojave Recovery Unit); and (3) substantially reduce major threats to the tortoise in the Reserve (e.g., currently these would be nutrition connected to invasive non-native plants connected to fire, predation, etc.). Continuing to manage the Reserve for the benefit of the tortoise should be the overall mission. The threats under the third goal may change during the 25-year implementation of the ITP so this would have a strong adaptive management component. Continuing with land acquisition fits under Goal 2.</p> <p>Conspicuously absent from the 2020 biological goals and objectives but needed because of scientific data on the UVRU and local newspaper articles (recent ones include St. George News May 26, 2019; May 30, 2019, October 25, 2019) are substantially improving tortoise nutrition; reducing predation, especially predation from human-subsidized sources, and substantially increasing fire management actions to include fire prevention; fire suppression actions to respond to and fight fires quickly; and habitat restoration following each fire. Appendix D of the 2020 HCP says (page D-2) “In 2018, wildfire continues to be one of the greatest threats to tortoise habitat. Until non-native invasive plant species are severely reduced in/near the Reserve and human-caused fires are curtailed, fire will continue to be a part of the Reserve’s future.” This serious threat to the MDT should be addressed in the HCP with appropriate biological goals and objectives, conservation actions, effectiveness monitoring, and adaptive management.</p> <p>As the St. George area grows, the human-provided subsidies for predators of the tortoise will grow. This will likely</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>result (as it has elsewhere in the range of the MDT) in increased predator population sizes (e.g., common raven, coyote, feral and domestic dog, etc.) and subsequent increased predation on the MDT. The HCP should include a plan to monitor tortoise predation and predators, and implement effective actions to substantially reduce this predation.</p> <p>Improving tortoise nutrition should be a biological goal with objectives and conservation actions implemented to improve the availability of native nutritious plants for tortoises in the Reserve. This goal is closely tied to successful management of non-native invasive plant species that exclude native plant species, have lower nutritional values for tortoises, and provide a sustained fuel source for fires in an ecosystem with native plants not adapted to surviving fires. Thus, improving nutrition for the MDT is connected to reducing fuel loads for fires in the Reserve.</p>
172	66	6.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Modifying the 1995 goals and objectives and reasons for the modifications: Because the 2020 HCP wants to modify the goals of the 1995 HCP, the reasons for these modifications should be presented (e.g., information on the status of the UVRU tortoise population/status of the species, threats [including climate change], changed/new management needs for the species/habitat because of new information [including effectiveness monitoring implemented under the HCP], and/or success in achieving a previously stated goal. These modifications should be clearly identified and reasons provided to support why it is being changed. Why the modifications are needed should be straightforward as updated information on status of the UVRU population and species, threats (including climate change), management needs for the species/habitat should have been provided under Section 3.2 (including all its subsections) and Section 4 of the 2020 HCP. We agree that the goals and objectives need to be modified. Those in the 2020 HCP should be about the current and perceived future needs of the MDT based on current data. The goals and objectives should not be a slight tweaking of the 1995 goals and objectives as much data has been collected to demonstrate that the acquisition of habitat (the primary goal of the 1995 HCP) is not effective in managing for the tortoise,</p>
173	66	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: We note on page 66 that the Amended HCP “...responds to the proposed Northern Corridor as a Changed Circumstance affecting the conservation value of the Reserve and provides for substantial new conservation actions in response” and then on page 67 lists nine goals and objectives identified in 1995. Three of these include (emphasis added): (1) managing the acquired lands within the Reserve in a manner consistent with the conservation missions</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>of the BLM and UDNR, with enforcement of associated land use restrictions; (2) removing land uses from the Reserve that are not Covered Activities and that impact the MDT, such as land development, grazing, off-road use, mining, and others; and (3) conserving, primarily through the establishment and management of the Reserve, the ecological value and biological diversity of the Mojave Desert landscape that provides food and cover for Considered Species and other native wildlife and plants. On page 67, there is then the statement that these goals and objectives are "...carried forward in the Amended HCP."</p> <p>Comment: This is simply not true. Although we understand that elevated management in Zone 6 is intended to offset impacts of the Northern Corridor, these three goals and objectives are (1) specifically and only relevant to the Reserve as it was established in 1996, not as it would be compromised in 2020; and (2) when these goals and objectives were identified in 1995, they were considered in the absence of the Northern Corridor. Therefore, these three goals and objectives ARE NOT being carried forward, and regardless of any extraneous protection provided to Zone 6, the integrity of the Reserve will be compromised. Furthermore, given tortoise declines of up to 41% within the Reserve, we believe that the Amended HCP is negligent in its failure to reconsider the goals to address these losses and other impacts identified herein (e.g., with regards to predation, poaching, invasive weeds, fire, etc.).</p>
174	66	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: The 2020 HCP says objectives of the 2020 HCP are "- meeting substantively the recovery recommendations for establishing the Upper Virgin River DWMA (i.e., the Reserve) contemplated in the 1994 and 2011 MDT Recovery Plans; - placing most lands within the Reserve under BLM or UDNR ownership, subject to willing partnerships with non-federal landowners; - managing the acquired lands within the Reserve in a manner consistent with the conservation missions of the BLM and UDNR, with enforcement of associated land use restrictions."</p> <p>Comment: The Permittee has no authority over BLM and UDNR and will have no way of ensuring that the management of these lands is consistent with the management of the Recovery Plan, which should be addressed in the newly-modified HCP.</p>
175	66-67	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Please clearly label any new Biological Goals and Objectives for the 2020 HCP as those being developed for the 2020 HCP.</p>
176	66 & 84-85	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: "o placing most lands within the Reserve under BLM or UDNR ownership, subject to willing partnerships with non-federal landowners;"</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>Comment: This sentence needs to be modified. The BLM has not demonstrated that it is a worthy manager for the conservation of the Mojave desert tortoise. The status and trend of the MDT in TCAs throughout most of the range of the MDT are below viability and have shown a downward trend since the current population sampling protocol was initiated in the early 2000's. Please see our Attachment D. This decline is especially noteworthy in California where the BLM manages the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA). In establishing the CDCA, Congress declared that–</p> <p>(1) the California desert contains historical, scenic, archeological, environmental, biological, cultural, scientific, educational, recreational, and economic resources that are uniquely located adjacent to an area of large population;</p> <p>(2) the California desert environment is a total ecosystem that is extremely fragile, easily scarred, and slowly healed;</p> <p>(3) the California desert environment and its resources, including certain rare and endangered species of wildlife, plants, and fishes, and numerous archeological and historic sites, are seriously threatened by air pollution, inadequate Federal management authority, and pressures of increased use, particularly recreational use, which are certain to intensify because of the rapidly growing population of southern California;</p> <p>(4) the use of all California desert resources can and should be provided for in a multiple use and sustained yield management plan to conserve these resources for future generations” (emphasis added).</p> <p>BLM has changed their RMPs several times in the CDCA to allow for more development and human use in TCAs that adversely impact tortoises/tortoise habitats despite declining population numbers, densities, and low recruitment of MDTs. BLM can do the same thing for the RMP for the RCNCA. The RMP and Public Law 111-11 are not assurances that the RCNCA will be managed for the benefit of the tortoise and the language in the 2020 HCP should reflect this lack of assurance. That the pertinent RMP(s) will likely be modified to accommodate the Northern Corridor is evidence of this assertion.</p> <p>In addition, the 2020 HCP says, “The overarching intent of the Washington County HCP is to create a conservation program, compatible with the County’s community goals and objectives, for conserving the Upper Virgin River population of MDT in its native habitat in perpetuity.” We contend that until there is a legal way to require BLM to</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					retain and manage lands set aside, purchased, or exchanged for conservation purposes and in perpetuity, these lands should be held by another entity and a permanent conservation easement placed on them. Please modify this sentence so it specifies that only an entity that can legally ensure that lands acquired for conservation purposes (e.g., managed for the MDT) will be managed for those purposes in perpetuity would be able to own these lands.
177	66	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “o managing the acquired lands within the Reserve in a manner consistent with the conservation missions of the BLM and UDNR, with enforcement of associated land use restrictions;”</p> <p>Comment: First, please change the first part to say, “managing and restoring the acquired lands...” Second, once these lands are owned by BLM or UDWR, Washington County has no control over their management. What legal mechanism is Washington County going to implement to ensure these lands are managed for the tortoise and in perpetuity? Please address this issue in the HCP. And provide assurances. Third, BLM does not have a conservation mission. It has a “multiple use” mission even in an NCA as they must still comply with FLMPA. This language needs to be corrected.</p>
178	66	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “o incentivizing the siting of Covered Activities in areas that are not MDT habitat or that are poor-quality MDT habitat through land use planning, impact fees, and environmental education;”</p> <p>Comment: The HCP should not limit its potential source of funding to one source. If another recession occurs and development is severely curtailed, who will pay for the management, monitoring, and adaptive management requirements of the HCP? In addition, activities that have resulted in increased amounts of incidental take in the Reserve indicate there is a need for greater law enforcement in the Reserve. Please change this to read “...through land use planning, impact fees, environmental education, and law enforcement;”</p>
179	66	6.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We found no commitment to manage the lands in the Reserve for the benefit of the MDT in perpetuity. Please add this as a goal especially given the 2020 HCP’s statement on page 66 “The overarching intent of the Washington County HCP is to create a conservation program, compatible with the County’s community goals and objectives, for conserving the Upper Virgin River population of MDT in its native habitat in perpetuity.” In addition, the development is permanent so the management of the lands for the tortoise and management of the tortoise must also be permanent. The mitigation commitment is not for the term of the permit; it is in perpetuity (in spite of the current intent to redefine “perpetuity” so as to accommodate the Northern Corridor). The term of the permit only</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					limits the time during which incidental take as a result of a Covered Activity is lawful.
180	66-67 69-77	6.1.2	NA	NA	Comment: The USFWS' 2016 HCP Handbook says, "we do have a few rules that must be met. Applicants must minimize and mitigate the effects of their actions to the maximum extent practicable and the measures must be manageable and enforceable. Also, the applicant must clearly articulate the biological goals and objectives in the HCP with measurable success criteria." In reading Section 6 of the 2020 HCP, we did not find the document adhered to these rules. We are unsure how each completed and ongoing conservation action contributed to which biological objective and goal of the 1995 HCP and whether the success criteria were met. We are unsure how each ongoing conservation action contributes to which biological objective and goal of the 1995 HCP and the 2020 HCP. Absent this information, we cannot determine whether the HCP has made measurable success toward recovery of the MDT in the Plan Area. From the UDWR reports, it appears that tortoise densities have declined markedly since the ITP was implemented. Please provide this information in the 2020 HCP and show how the implementation of the HCP has improved the status of the MDT in 2020.
181	67	6.2.1	NA	NA	Text: "o translocating healthy MDT individuals from areas affected by Covered Activities to the Reserve, thereby minimizing the impacts of the Covered Activities on the MDT and expanding the protected MDT population;" Comment: This wording says that translocated tortoises may be released anywhere in the Reserve. We do not think this is the intent nor is it biologically appropriate or sound management. For example, if the Northern Corridor were developed, would tortoises be placed in impaired habitats south of the new freeway? Please modify wording in the HCP so that only areas designated for translocated tortoises receive them.
182	67	6.2.1	NA	NA	Text: "o monitoring MDT population trends and MDT threats in the Permit Area to support adaptive management actions." Comment: Please change this to say "monitoring MDT population trends and MDT threats in the Plan Area and to implement adaptive management actions promptly based on monitoring results. " We are not sure why monitoring would be limited to the Permit Area. It should include the larger Plan Area.
183	68	6.2.1	NA	13	Text: We appreciate the inclusion of this table (USFWS 2014). The 2020 HCP says, " The DTMOG and the local Recovery Implementation Teams reexamine these priorities on an annual basis to develop specific recovery projects. " Comment: However, the recent fires in the Reserve and history of large fires point out the need to revise this 2014

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					list and implement these recovery projects. We would assert that “Fire management planning and implementation” should be implemented concurrently with habitat restoration. Fire management planning should include implementation of actions that effectively reduce the fuels provided by nonnative plant species that carry fires. This project should be a high priority.
184	68	6.2.1	NA	13	Comment: We found no information in Section 6.2.1 that ties the biological goals and objectives to the conservation actions, or provides information on whether they have been implemented, would continue to be implemented, or are proposed for implementation. Without this stepdown accounting, it is not possible to determine whether the conservation actions are likely to achieve the biological objectives and biological goals. Please provide a table or list of the biological goals with their objectives and conservation actions under each.
185	66-68	6.1.2	NA	NA	Text: On page 6 of the 2020 HCP (Section 1.3 Amended Habitat Conservation Plan), the document says, “ This Amended HCP makes certain changes to facilitate the continued implementation of this recovery-focused HCP for the Renewed/Amended ITP Term, including ...addressing changes in regulation and applicable policy guidance related to HCPs, such as the No Surprises rule (63 <i>Federal Register</i> [FR] 8859), Surrogate Rule (80 FR 26832), and the HCP Handbook. ” On page 9 (Section 1.5 Regulatory Framework) the 2020 HCP says, “ The HCP Handbook provides guidance to ITP applicants and the USFWS regarding the preparation of HCPs. ” Comment: However, Section 6.1.2 of the 2020 HCP does not seem to be following the policy guidance in the USFWS’ 2016 Habitat Conservation Handbook regarding identifying appropriate biological, goals, SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, result-oriented, and time-fixed) biological objectives, and conservation actions (Sections 9.1, 9.2, and 9.3 of the Handbook.) The 2020 HCP has used the policy guidance from other sections of this Handbook to support changes it is proposing in the 2020 HCP. We affirm that Section 6.1.2 of the 2020 HCP should follow Section 9 of the 2016 HCP Handbook in the development of the biological goals and objectives and their relationship to each other. This relationship should be clearly demonstrated in the HCP.
186	66-68	6.1.2	NA	NA	Comment: The biological goals and objectives in the 2020 HCP should demonstrate how they are considering climate change given the 25-year term of the permit. The 2016 HCP Handbook stresses the importance of considering climate change in the development of biological goals and objectives as it has a section on this topic (Section 9.2.2 Considering Climate Change Effects in the Development of Goals and Objectives). We request that the 2020 HCP

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					explain how it considered climate change in the development of its biological goals and objectives.
187	69-72	6.2.1	NA	NA	Comment: This section is confusing. It is titled “Conservation Actions” but it appears to be more of a financial accounting. Please add a table of the completed conservation actions under each biological goal and objective from the 1995 HCP and a table of all the biological goals and corresponding biological objectives, conservation actions, and effectiveness monitoring that will be implemented in the 2020 HCP so we can determine what has been accomplished to attain the biological goals and objectives of the 1995 HCP and how they have changed given new information the status of and threats to the MDT in the UVRU. This is a reiteration of Comment 171 above.
188	69-71	6.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Maximum extent practicable – The 2016 HCP Handbook says, “the applicant must show that their HCP will minimize and mitigate the impacts of the taking to the maximum extent practicable because either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The combination of minimization and mitigation in the HCP leaves no remaining impacts of the taking on the species that could be further mitigated or minimized, that is all impacts will be fully offset. <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the applicant cannot fully offset the impacts of the taking, they must demonstrate that it is not practicable to carry out any additional minimization or mitigation.” <p>The Handbook says “to determine that the proposed HCP minimization and mitigation measures meet the “maximum extent practicable” standard, we must be able to define “impacts of the taking” for the particular situation we are analyzing. Consider the impacts of the taking in a manner that is biologically sound and based on the best available science. Some examples of fully offsetting impacts include:</p> <p>Habitat example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss: 100 acres of habitat type x are permanently lost. • Measure to offset impacts: restore and protect in perpetuity (at least) 100 acres of habitat type x that is of (at least) equal biological value to the covered species before impacts occur. • Key questions: what value did the habitat lost have to the covered species? What value does the replacement habitat have to covered species (e.g., did the replacement habitat provide for the same life stage of the covered species as that lost)? Does the replacement ratio need to be greater than 1:1 to compensate for the lag time between impacts and full

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>eco-function of the replacement habitat, to allow for restoration uncertainties, or is consistent with previously-defined recovery objectives? Is the identified conservation habitat likely to remain suitable in reasonably anticipated future climate scenarios? Is there more value to the species by replacing the habitat that is lost with a different habitat type (e.g. breeding vs. foraging habitat)?”</p> <p>The above questions need to be answered in the HCP.</p> <p>“Loss of individuals example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Loss: 100 individuals will be taken. ● Measure to offset impacts: measures should be implemented to fully offset the effects to the population or species from the loss of those 100 individuals (e.g., removal of non-native species, restoration, etc.). Conservation measures could affect the population by increasing carrying capacity (through improving habitat), or increasing population growth rate (by reducing threats) for instance. ● Key questions: what life stage of individuals would be lost? In a long-lived species, loss of adults may have a much higher effect on the species or population than loss of juveniles, which may require actions to replace the loss of 100 adults with 400 juveniles, since many juveniles will die before reaching the adult (reproductive) stage. What is the value to the population of the life stages that would be lost? What is the significance to the population or species to lose 100 individuals? Is it an important population loss? What is the expected reproductive value that could be lost before being replaced? Is the lost reproductive value factored into the mitigation requirements?” <p>The above questions need to be answered in the HCP.</p> <p>Text: In the 2020 HCP, page 99 says “6.4 IMPACTS OF TAKE FULLY OFFSET</p> <p>The impacts of take authorized with the Original ITP and reauthorized with the Extended/Amended ITP are fully offset by the conservation program of the 1995 HCP (see Chapter 6.2.1). This conservation program is carried</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>forward and expanded in this Amended HCP.” Section 6.2.1 says, “The 1995 HCP included an administrative provision whereby the funding or completion of certain conservation measures ‘released’ a certain amount of the incidental take authorized by the ITP, a provision referred to in the 1995 HCP as ‘incremental implementation’ (1995 HCP:114, 115). This administrative accounting tracked the implementation of those actions required of the County to minimize and mitigate the impacts of the authorized take and to ensure that pace of take remained in line with the implementation of the recovery-focused actions of the BLM related to the agency’s commitment to acquire lands within the Reserve.” It also says, “The incidental take areas that were subject to incremental implementation under the 1995 HCP totaled 12,264 acres, or the extent of occupied MDT habitat mapped on non-federal lands outside of the Reserve circa 1995 (see Chapter 3.2.3.2.1. Incremental implementation did not apply to authorized take associated with other Covered Activities.”</p> <p>Comment: We assert that this section does not analyze or explain how the HCP minimization and mitigation measures in the 1995 HCP now meet the “maximum extent practicable” standard, as we found no analysis that defined “impacts of the taking” for the number of tortoises authorized in the ITP for specific geographic area. Because the Applicant wants to use habitat as a surrogate for the incidental take of tortoises in the 2020 HCP, we were unable to find in the HCP a description using the best scientific information of how the impacts of incidental take of tortoises would be converted to impacts to tortoise habitat. In addition, we assert that incidental take associated with <u>all</u> Covered Activities should be minimized and mitigated to the maximum extent practicable in the 2020 HCP, which was not the case in the 1995 HCP.</p> <p>We were unable to find these analyses in the 2020 HCP. We request that they be added to the HCP using the incidental take that was authorized in the 1996 ITP and adding the incidental take now requested in the 2020 HCP.</p>
189	71-77	6.2.2	NA	15	<p>Comment: It is not possible to determine accurately from this table what conservations actions were implemented for which biological goals and objectives under the 1995 HCP. Similar to Comments 171 and 187 above, please provide a stepdown accounting of the goals, then objectives, then conservation actions that have been taken so the reader is able to determine the progress made toward meeting the biological goals. The accomplishments may be impressive, but we cannot tell to what extent (and particularly, what is missing) because of the manner in which the information is</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					presented.
190	78	6.3.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “This Amended HCP reaffirms that Reserve acquisitions and long-term management are not the obligations of the County.”</p> <p>Comment: This flat statement needs to be justified with more discussion in the Final HCP. Again, it seems as if the County is minimally participating in the conservation actions of a plan that results in maximum benefits to the County in terms of its future development. We believe that this mentality may be one reason the County has stockpiled more than seven million dollars in HCP fees when there have been many outstanding conservation measures that should have been implemented (e.g., culverts under Cottonwood Trail, development of a fire management plan, acquisition of private and SITLA lands within the actual Reserve, curtailing raven depredation, increased law enforcement to avoid fires on holiday weekends, addressing the excessive loss of 146 tortoises to crushing along roads and trails within the Reserve, etc.).</p>
191	78	6.3.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The 1995 Reserve boundary met substantively the recovery recommendations for establishing the Upper Virgin River DWMA contemplated in the 1994 and 2011 MDT Recovery Plans (USFWS 1994a, 2011; see Chapter 6.1.2).”</p> <p>Comment: The above statement may (or may not) have proven true in 1995 and perhaps in 2020 prior to reissuance of the ITP, but facilitation of the Northern Corridor through the Reserve by the Amended HCP introduces variables such that this statement is no longer true, which the Amended HCP needs to address. For example, the Reserve would no longer be roadless or inaccessible to humans as recommended in the 1994 Recovery Plan.</p>
192	78	6.3.1	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The establishment of the Reserve is the primary conservation measure of the 1995 HCP. The 1995 Reserve boundary met substantively the recovery recommendations for establishing the Upper Virgin River DWMA contemplated in the 1994 and 2011 MDT Recovery Plans (USFWS 1994a, 2011; see Chapter 6.1.2). The 1994 MDT Recovery Plan describes the DWMAs as those areas “in which recovery actions will be implemented to provide for the long-term persistence of viable desert tortoise populations and the ecosystems upon which they depend.”</p> <p>Comment: We argue that establishing a boundary does not establish a Reserve. A Reserve is those areas in which recovery actions will be implemented to provide the long-term persistence of viable desert tortoise populations and ecosystems upon which they depend. Both the acquisition of lands and implementation of effective management of</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					those lands are needed to substantively meet the 1994 Recovery Plan recommendations for the UVRRU DWMA. We also argue that only establishing one reserve in the UVRRU is not preferred as it does not assure long-term persistence of the MDT without intensive management of that land. Please see the Recovery Plan for the Desert Tortoise Mojave Population (USFWS 1994 - pages 31-61, F7 – F9) and Proposed Desert Wildlife Management Areas for Recovery of the Mojave Population of the Desert Tortoise - A Companion Document to the Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan Providing Detailed Information on Each of the 14 Proposed Desert Wildlife Management Areas (USFWS 1994 - pages 23-27).
193	83	6.3.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Expanding on the 1995 HCP, this Amended HCP anticipates the use of the following mechanisms for acquiring private lands and SITLA-owned lands within the Reserve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchanges with BLM lands outside the Reserve boundary, on a case-by-case basis with individual landowners; • Fee simple land purchases that may be supported by monies from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, USFWS Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (also known as ESA Section 6 funds), the sale of BLM-managed lands (as provided for under the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act), Utah’s Endangered Species Mitigation Fund (the LeRay McAllister Critical Lands Conservation Fund administered by the Utah Governor’s Office of Management and Budget), or other available sources; • Purchases of conservation easements that may be supported by monies from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, USFWS Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund, the sale of BLM-managed lands (as provided for under the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act), or other available sources; or • Donations of fee simple interest or conservation easements. <p>This Amended HCP establishes that conservation easements are an acceptable tool for achieving Reserve acquisitions. The County and the HCP Partners anticipate that conservation easements associated with Reserve acquisitions should be in perpetuity.”</p> <p>Comment: The conservation easement should not be <i>anticipated</i> to be in perpetuity, it must be <i>required</i>. Throughout the HCP we found non-committal language for conservation actions in several places. It implies to the USFWS and the reader that this should happen but makes no commitment to do it. This is not acceptable. The language in the 2020 HCP should be clear and concise. It should not be suggestive. Please change this language to say that all conservation</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>easements will be in perpetuity.</p> <p>A conservation easement in perpetuity would be an acceptable tool, as would the other methods described above, if it also means the following will occur: All surface and subsurface rights (e.g., mineral, water, energy, etc.) will be relinquished by the landowner. In addition, in Utah, the status on conservation easement says, “The existence of a conservation easement may not defeat or interfere with the otherwise proper exercise of eminent domain under Title 78B, Chapter 6, Part 5, Eminent Domain.” (Utah Code, Chapter 18, Land Conservation Easement Act, 57-18-1).” Consequently, a conservation easement in perpetuity is not a guarantee that it will be in perpetuity, as it is not immune to being overturned by a local or state government. To be guaranteed in perpetuity, the conservation easement must include a document from the local and state government that has jurisdiction over the property that they are relinquishing their exercise of eminent domain on this property.</p>
194	83	6.3.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Expanding on the 1995 HCP, this Amended HCP anticipates the use of the following mechanisms for acquiring private lands and SITLA-owned lands within the Reserve:”</p> <p>Comment: Our question is what were the methods identified in the 1995 HCP and what changes/additions are being made in the amended 2020 HCP? Please provide this information in the HCP.</p> <p>Again, this is an example of the 2020 HCP not providing complete information and a clear history of what the 1995 HCP says and what the 2020 HCP says. Because this is an amended HCP, this history and these changes must be clearly presented so the USFWS and public know what changes are being proposed and how that relates to accomplishing the biological goals and objectives of the HCP with respect to the status and trend of the tortoise since 1995 and changes in threats (e.g., new threats previously not identified, increase in frequency, duration, and/or location/occurrence of threats) from those identified in the 1995 HCP to those in the 2020 HCP.</p>
195	86-87	6.3.2.1	12	NA	<p>Comment: Page 3-36 of Volume 2 of the DEIS reports that 146 injured or dead tortoises have been found inside the Reserve. We ask that Figure 12 be amended or a new figure created that shows the locations of these injured and dead tortoises. We ask that the final version of the Amended HCP be modified to indicate how the HCP partners intend to curtail this impact, particularly if the Northern Corridor is constructed. Similarly, we expect that there will be a</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					commitment from HCP partners to monitor for and report injured and dead tortoises within Zone 6, if it is established as a satellite reserve, which has not been identified in the Draft EIS.
196	90	6.3.2.2 6.3.2.3	NA	NA	Comment: As expressed elsewhere, we are concerned about the perpetuation of competitive vehicle events in the Zone 6 area, should it become a satellite reserve. We ask that the Amended HCP specifically address this concern and require educational materials that are directed towards the non-participant spectators visiting the areas before, during, and after these events. With regards to law enforcement (Section 6.3.2.2), we request that the Amended HCP be modified to require elevated law enforcement by the appropriate agencies during such authorized events, particularly in Zone 6, should it become a satellite reserve (see Comment 83 for additional details).
197	93	6.3.2.4	NA	NA	Comment: Because translocation of MDT is a Covered Activity, the HCP needs to provide information on where tortoises would be translocated to and how this translocation would affect the resident tortoises with respect to competition for food resources, mates, home range, cover sites, and social order. "Appendix E Translocation Management Plan," which should have contained some of this information is only a title page as a placeholder. Please include this needed information to assess incidental take from Covered Activities.
198	66 93	6.3.2.5	NA	NA	Text: "...responds to the proposed Northern Corridor as a Changed Circumstance affecting the conservation value of the Reserve and provides for substantial new conservation actions in response." Comment: Given the above statement on page 66 of the Red Cliffs Reserve and the current intent to manage Zone 6 as part of the Reserve, should Section 6.3.2.5 be amended to document intended actions within Zone 6? In other words, the Amended HCP seeks to redefine what is meant by "Reserve" to include Zone 6, so the statement that no additional actions are required "within the Reserve" may be misconstrued.
199	99	6.4	NA	NA	Text: "The impacts of take authorized with the Original ITP and reauthorized with the Extended/Amended ITP are fully offset by the conservation program of the 1995 HCP (see Chapter 6.2.1). This conservation program is carried forward and expanded in this Amended HCP. " Comment: The Council feels that the point has been made in numerous places elsewhere in our comments that the Amended HCP will not perpetuate the "successes" of the existing HCP; at worse, it facilitates, and at best, accommodates, development of the Northern Corridor, which substantially detracts from conservation within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve. The reason for our redundancies, then, is to point out those places in the Amended HCP where

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the statements are often inaccurate, misleading, and/or presumptuous. For example, the above statement where our emphasis is added is blatantly false because the Amended HCP would facilitate/accommodate development of the Northern Corridor as a “Changed Circumstance.” In this specific case, the Changed Circumstance substantially undermines the conservation program, which is not being “ carried forward ” in its present form, and is certainly not “ expanded .” Therefore, in spite of our redundancies, we feel that the document authors need to modify the document to demonstrate that this Amended HCP cannot carry forward a conservation program that is substantially modified by development of a freeway through the actual Reserve plus the promised conservation in a satellite reserve.
200	100	6.4.1	NA	NA	Text: “The 1995 HCP established an approximately 61,000-acre Reserve for the conservation of the MDT that is consistent with the lands identified as necessary for recovery in the MDT Recovery Plan.” Comment: Whereas the above statement may have been true in 1995, it is equally true that the 2020 Amended HCP undermines this established Reserve under the technicality of a “Changed Circumstance” and is no longer consistent with tortoise recovery. We feel that this and numerous other places in the Amended HCP serve more as a public relations piece than an actual scientific assessment of current management without a Northern Corridor and future management with the freeway through the Reserve. For example, the following question is never addressed in either the DEIS or the Amended HCP: “Would USFWS have issued the 1996 ITP had the Northern Corridor been identified as a Covered Activity inside the Reserve?” We think not. And now that tortoises have declined by more than 50% in five of the six Recovery Units and by 41% within the Reserve, we don’t think the freeway should be supported as a <i>de facto</i> part of the 2020 ITP reissuance either.
201	91 101	6.2.3.4 6.4.2	NA	NA	Comment: Please note on page 91 of the Amended HCP that the authors indicate that 3,754 acres have been repopulated in Zone 4, whereas page 101 indicates that 5,318 acres have been repopulated. Regardless of this discrepancy, since the Amended HCP indicates that these tortoises are not monitored after release, the authors do not know to what extent tortoises have dispersed within the fenced Zone 4 reserve and therefore cannot conclusively identify the number of acres repopulated. Are they clumped within a portion of Zone 4 or evenly distributed? In the absence of this distribution data, the extent of repopulation is speculative, and the number of repopulated acres should not be guessed at or lauded as one of the HCPs resounding successes.
202	66	6.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: On page 66, we find it noteworthy that in spite of the following sentence, “ The County also intends for

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
	109	6.5			<p>this Amended HCP to respond to the proposed Northern Corridor,” that the Northern Corridor is not mentioned again until page 109, when development of the freeway is referred to as a foregone conclusion (emphasis added): “Within 10 years of the triggering the proposed Northern Corridor Changed Circumstance, the County and the HCP Partners will develop a survey.” Yet, in numerous places between pages 66 and 109 (in addition to the observations given above), the Amended HCP reads as if the Reserve will continue to function, unchanged as it has since 1996. This leaves the reader with a false sense that what has been proposed and deemed a resounding success (the main thrust of the Amended HCP seems to document commitments above and beyond those required in 1995) will continue to function, as if the freeway will not be developed. We contend that in this respect the Amended HCP document is misleading, presumptions, and has failed to document what it identifies as a foreseeable, planned-for “Changed Circumstance.” Without divulging the ramifications of those changes and the overall impact of the freeway to the conservation balance, we contend that the document’s focus on successes between 1995 and 2019 fails to divulge how those successes are compromised by impairing the function of the Reserve going forward, which is identified in the Executive Summary as the “primary conservation measure” of the HCP. We feel that nearly every section of the Amended HCP needs to be reconsidered and modified to document current management without a freeway versus future management with a freeway, otherwise the Amended HCP does not effectively document the full extent of future conservation with a freeway through its Reserve.</p>
203	113-114	7.3.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Technical Committee Composition – only see USFWS, UDWR, BLM, UDNr – Snow Canyon, local biologist nominated by Washington County Commission, and biologist-at-large nominated by the HCAC. The function of the technical Committee is to provide “technical guidance to the HCAC and HCP Administrator on matters related to the biology and conservation of the MDT and other protected species occurring in the Plan Area.” This responsibility means the committee members would need to possess current knowledge in several disciplines including conservation biology, population ecology, plant community ecology, and fire management. We recommend that research scientists in these disciplines be on the committee because of their knowledge and expertise and because they would be unlikely to have a vested interest in the HCP or Plan Area. This selection process, if it is the only requirement, gives an appearance of political influence. In addition to the current process, we recommend that criteria be developed regarding the knowledge and expertise needed for managing the Reserve for the tortoise, and then fill</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the positions on the Committee with persons with this knowledge and expertise. This provides for an objective selection process that fulfills the needed expertise on the Committee and provides a scientific foundation for this Committee.
204	118-123	8.1.1	NA	20	<p>Comment: Referring back to Comment 202 above, we feel that the first actual acknowledgement of the Northern Corridor as part of the Amended HCP is not mentioned until page 118, where the document assumes the Changed Circumstances will be triggered. And that the first real analysis of the impact of the proposed freeway is not revealed until page 123 of the Amended HCP, when the following financial data are provided. Given the budget presented in Section 8.1.1, Table 20, the County is committing to pay \$27,680,957 over the next 25 years to implement the plan. That, in response to UDOT's proposed freeway (or variation thereof), the County will pay \$16,171,151 (60% of the total cost) to accommodate the freeway compared to \$11,171,592 (40% of the total cost) without the freeway. And that this is only a fraction of the freeway-related costs, as it does not consider BLM expenditures that would not occur <i>but for</i> the freeway. In light of these observations, the Amended HCP seems more like a 16.2 million dollar mitigation package to accommodate a single entity's project – UDOT's freeway – than a proactive plan intended to recover tortoises.</p> <p>The proposed funding strategy is not reliable. It is not sufficiently diverse to deal with economic changes including recent major downturns seen to the building industry in the early 1990s and late 2000s. The funding strategy in this HCP should learn from and seek to avoid the adverse experiences of other HCPs/ITPs because of inadequate funding. Previously, the USFWS issued ITPs in southern California and southern Nevada that relied on building/development fees for funding conservation programs of HCPs. However, when building slowed, the funds were insufficient for implementing and maintaining the conservation program. USFWS should have learned from these experiences that a diversified source of funds is needed when building/development fees are the funding source for implementing the conservation program. In addition, the fee should not be fixed as the cost of implementation will likely increase during the 25-year permit term. This is another lesson the USFWS should have learned.</p>
205	118-123	8.1	20	NA	<p>Comment: Because the threats to the tortoise in the UVRRU and the Reserve, status of the tortoise population in the Reserve and its trend since the ITP was issued in 1996 are not provided, they do not lay the foundation for what the</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>appropriate conservation strategy is for the next 25 years for the tortoise. Because threats have increased in intensity, tortoise numbers and densities have declined, and habitat in the Reserve has been lost or severely impacted from human activities, the tortoise is in worse condition in 2020 than it was in 1996 when the ITP was issued. This should indicate that a continuation of past management is not working and substantial revisions to the Conservation Strategy are needed. Until this occurs in the HCP, the funding chapter cannot be developed.</p> <p>In addition, we assert the conservation actions funded in the HCP will not offset the incidental take of the tortoise requested in the HCP. The Permittee is requesting to provide XXX acres of conserved lands for development of 66,301 acres of tortoise habitat (Note: Since the Reserve could be bisected by the Northern Corridor, no one can ascertain how many actual acres are within the Reserve; should the areas south of the Northern Corridor continue to be counted as part of the Reserve if the freeway is developed? The answer is questionable; hence “XXX acres” in the above sentence). This is a 0.3:1 ratio of conservation and not acceptable under the MOG or any state conservation agency to offset impacts. However, the actual lands that the Permittee will be managing for the tortoise are far less as the Permittee has no management control over most of the lands identified for addition to the area inside the Reserve boundary, and as a result of the parenthetical note given above.</p> <p>Many of the conservation actions described in this section identify volunteers. The Permittee should not assume that these actions will be implemented as there may be a shortage of willing or trained volunteers. The implementation budget should include adequate funds to pay for all necessary wages and benefits, equipment, supplies, insurance, and contracts that should be implemented because the expertise that is needed to implement the HCP may not occur within the paid HCP positions (HCP Administrator, HCP Biologist, Outreach Coordinator, Field Technician) identified in the budget.</p> <p>On page 79, the 2020 HCP says, the Permittee acquired 1,240 acres, of which 350 acres were acquisition of mineral rights (page 79) and modified Reserve boundaries to add 987 acres, but we are not sure who manages this land.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>As previously mentioned, Law Enforcement is inadequately funded and seems again to rely on others (BLM and UDWR) to conduct most of the law enforcement. We have the same concerns for most of the conservation actions.</p> <p>According to Table 16 of the 2020 HCP, there are 36,968 acres of occupied or potential MDT habitat within the Reserve boundary. However, there is no information on how much is under the management of the Permittee or how many acres will remain after freeway construction. Table 17 shows 2,981 acres are private or other lands, some or all of which we presume are under the management of the Permittee. The remaining 59,028 acres are under federal or state management with the Permittee having no management authority. In the 1996 ITP, the Permittee was authorized to incidentally take the MDT on 25,096 acres. In the 2020 HCP, the Permittee is requesting to increase this acreage to 66,301 acres (page 55 - 5.2.2.2 Amount of Renewed Take Authorization). Thus, for the development of an additional 40,000 acres of MDT habitat, the Permittee is not proposing to acquire and manage in perpetuity MDT habitat that would offset this loss of 40,000 acres. We found no information on how endowment or enhancement funds or other means of providing adequate funding for the Reserve lands in perpetuity under the Permittee's management authority would occur. We note that throughout the 2020 HCP the Permittee uses "in perpetuity" when discussing the conservation for the MDT population in the UVRRU (p. 66, Section 6.1.2; .p. 83, Section 6.3.1.2). However, we do not see this intent expressed in implementation with respect to current and future funding. This oversight needs to be corrected.</p>
206	120	8.1.1	NA	20	<p>Comment: Under "Land Acquisition," the budget identified acquisition of 450 acres in Zone 6 at an estimated costs of \$5,000 per acre. In searching Land and Farm website, we discovered that land prices in the area west of St. George varied substantially with smaller parcels costing more per acre than larger ones. Prices we found ranged from \$18,000 to more than \$60,000 per acre for raw land. We suggest this section of the budget be revised to reflect current real estate process with a <u>real estate</u> inflation rate included. Using history of real estate prices, this inflation rate is frequently greater than the overall rate of inflation. In any case, the \$5,000/acre figure quoted seems to be a gross underestimate.</p> <p>Funding is not sufficient to implement the conservation program described in the HCP. For example, the funding</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>strategy claims that land acquisition in Zone 6 would be about \$5,000 per acre. In searching websites for raw land for sale in the area, the least expensive asking price found for raw land was \$18,000 per acre. Another example, there is little funding for effectiveness monitoring and adaptive management for implementation of the minimization and mitigation measures (e.g., public education and outreach, law enforcement, etc.). There is inadequate funding for proper implementation, monitoring, and adaptive management of a translocations program to any proposed new areas (e.g., studying resident tortoise before translocations, constructing and maintaining tortoise exclusion fencing along roadways in the Zone where translocation will occur, etc.).</p> <p>In addition, this section appears to assume that the 450 acres will be acquired gradually and throughout the 25-year permit term. Thus, if a large parcel becomes available for purchase in the first few years, the budget does not consider this and does not appear to have adequate funding. This also means that the conservation benefit for the MDT to be derived from the purchase and management of 450 acres of private lands would not be realized until near the end of the permit term. However, the acquisition of this land is supposedly a Changed Circumstance for the Northern Corridor freeway. The freeway will likely be built within a few years of the issuance of the ITP issuance so this land acquisition would need to occur very soon.</p>
207	120	8.1.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Under “Land Acquisition,” the budget identifies Reserve land acquisition real estate transaction costs (appraisals, surveys, title searches, recording fees, etc.) as \$20,000 per year with a total budget of \$648,851. At a low cost of raw land of \$18,000 per acre, if this price holds, the Permittee is anticipating only purchasing 36 acres with no inclusion of fees for appraisals, surveys, title searches, recording fees, etc. We do not understand how this budgeted amount or acreage amount would offset the additional 42,205 acres of incidental take the Permittee is requesting that is in addition to the incidental take granted in the 1996 ITP. Please explain in the revised HCP.</p>
208	122-123	8.1.1	NA	20	<p>Comment: Under “Monitoring and Adaptive Management Planning,” only one action is identified for funding – “Baseline Reserve population monitoring.” There are other effectiveness monitoring actions that should be added to the HCP budget to determine if the current management of the Reserve is achieving the intended goal of conserving the MDT. These include various types of recreational uses, habitat restoration efforts, and minimization efforts (e.g., types of fencing and locations, law enforcement, outreach and education, results of ongoing MDT translocation</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>efforts, etc.). In addition, there is the requirement to conduct compliance monitoring. This would apply, for example, to all human activities in the Reserve. We request this section be revised to indicate the different types of monitoring (e.g., compliance, effectiveness, etc.) that are required in an HCP, list the monitoring studies by activities that are known to contribute to take of the MDT (including “take” of habitat as this is the metric that the Permittee has requested to use to determine take). As such there should be a baseline study conducted to determine the quality, quantity, and connectivity of MDT habitat in the Reserve. This would then be compared to future studies (e.g., every 5 years) and comparisons made to determine if the habitat has improved, which can only be determined by monitoring.</p> <p>For all monitoring efforts, there should be an ecological statistician who reviews the monitoring design and implementation. If you do not properly monitor an issue, you do not know if your actions are effective.</p> <p>There should be a separate Adaptive Management Budget for the HCP, as not all implementation is successful. This budget should identify each issue that corresponds to each monitoring issue.</p>
209	124	8.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: This section relative to other HCP plan partners reverts back to 1995 estimated expenditures for BLM and UNDR, which are no longer applicable to the Amended HCP, given the “Changed Circumstances.” Nor is it consistent with Section 8.1.1 which reveals the costs of plan implementation with and without the Northern Corridor. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the authors to reveal what the costs are to BLM and UNDR with and without the Northern Corridor. We expect that the expenses to BLM (hence taxpayers) will be considerable (estimated at 60 to 70 million dollars on page 124) given that half of the Zone 6 satellite reserve is comprised of SITLA-managed lands would need to be purchased, and the County has stated it is not responsible for these acquisitions (see second bullet on page 110).</p>
210	124	8.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We note that Section 8.1.2 restates the intended budgets of 1995 without revealing actual expenditures by the BLM or UNDR; that nowhere in the Amended HCP is there an accounting of expenditures to date by these entities. Therefore, we ask that this section be amended to reveal the actual costs of implementation to date. This request is consistent with the next section, where expenditures by Washington County are given to the dollar:</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					“...\$6,344,254 more than originally budgeted for implementation of the 1995 HCP (70% more).”
211	124	8.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The BLM and UDNR are responsible for Reserve land acquisitions and long-term management and monitoring toward achieving the recovery-focused biological goals and objectives of this Amended HCP.”</p> <p>Comment: Habitat acquisition and management is the primary conservation strategy of the 1995 and 2020 HCPs. Washington County was granted incidental take to develop on about 25,000 acres of MDT habitat under the 1996 ITP. It now requests incidental take for the MDT for an additional 42,205 acres with no commitment to acquire and manage habitat for the MDT. This apparent absence of minimizing and mitigating the impacts of the incidental take must be changed and the conservation strategy of the HCP substantially modified to include funding for acquisition, enhancement, and management in perpetuity of the habitat acquired under the HCP to demonstrate the Permittee has minimized and mitigated to the maximum extent practicable (see 2016 HCP Handbook). The Permittee cannot and should not rely on a state and federal entities to provided minimization and mitigation measures for incidental take of the MDT, as the Permittee has no management authority over these entities. Thus, there is no assurance that the lands acquired by BLM and State agencies will be managed for the MDT in perpetuity. Please provide additional analyses of funding sources and expenditures to address this absence of assurances.</p> <p>In addition, the HCP says, “...the value of its remaining lands within the Reserve may roughly total approximately \$60 to \$70 million.” If this is correct, the Funding section of the HCP should show how many acres of private land remain within the Reserve boundary and how the Applicants propose to raise sufficient funds to purchase these lands as habitat acquisition in the Reserve is their primary conservation action. Page 120 of the HCP shows Total Expenses (future value with inflation) for Land Acquisition of less than \$650,000.</p>
212	124-125	8.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The Permittee’s portion for the costs of implementing the 2020 HCP are small when compared to those of the BLM and state agencies as acquisition and management is left to the land holder. Most lands with the Reserve boundary are under BLM or state agency management. This avoidance of mitigation responsibility by the Permittee should be changed with the responsibility for funding mitigation and minimization in perpetuity with the Permittee. This means that the source of funding should not be limited to development fees. The Permittee must demonstrate that they have funds available or have the authority to and will implement fees to entities of Washington County to</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					fully fund a substantially revised HCP that takes responsibility for habitat acquisition, enhancement of habitat, and management of that habitat in perpetuity for the benefit of the tortoise. We request this section be substantially modified to demonstrate this funding availability.
213	124	8.2.1	NA	NA	<p>Text in footnote: “The 1995 HCP also established a fee assessed by the Municipal Partners on new plat approvals for subdivision, condominium, town home, or public utility district developments.” “this platting flat fee did not adjust with inflation and only generated approximately 10% of the HCP revenue collected over the term of the Original ITP. The County has simplified the funding mechanism for this Amended HCP by eliminating the assessment of this flat fee, in favor of relying on the 0.2% fee on building permits.”</p> <p>Comment: From this language, it appears that the County has a fixed fee for funding the HCP. We found no language in the HCP that suggests this percentage can or would be increased as needed to fully fund the implementation of the HCP. This flexibility language should be added as should identification of other funding sources if the fee from building permits is not adequate (e.g., slowdown in development, etc.).</p>
214	125	8.3	NA	20	<p>Text: “Nonetheless, the County assures that the general level and distribution of funding illustrated in Table 20 will be available to implement its commitments under this Amended HCP through the Renewed/Amended ITP Term.”</p> <p>Comment: As presented above in comments concerning pages 118 through 125 of the Amended HCP, the funded items and amounts are inadequate. They do not approach the USFWS standard of minimizing and mitigating to the maximum extent practicable by offsetting the impacts of the incidental take.</p>
215	126	8.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “In the event that the County is unable to meet all or part of its funding obligation, the County will enter into discussions with USFWS to discuss feasible alternatives which can accomplish the requirements as stated in this Amended HCP. In the event that funding cannot continue at committed levels, then an amendment procedure may be initiated to reduce the scope of this Amended HCP. In the event that the County cannot continue to make payments as specified in this Amended HCP or worked out through an amendment procedure, then the County’s obligation to fund the HCP as described in Chapter 8.1 shall terminate and the County shall thereafter have no obligation to make further payments and the USFWS may initiate action to revoke the ITP.”</p> <p>Comment: The presence of this paragraph indicates that the Applicants cannot provide assurances to fund the HCP. We find this unacceptable and not meeting the requirements for issuing an ITP. The Applicants have the authority to</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					implement additional funding sources through various means (e.g., increase the fee above 0.2%, assess other fees as all who reside in Washington County benefit from the Reserve, etc.). If the Applicants truly want to implement the HCP and demonstrate good faith, they will remove this paragraph from the HCP.
216	126	8.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The USFWS and BLM intend to fulfill their responsibilities completely and expeditiously, as confirmed with the execution of the Implementation Agreement. Both BLM and USFWS will, to the maximum extent practicable, allocate sufficient staff and financial resources as may be necessary to accomplish these responsibilities. USFWS shall include in annual budget requests sufficient funds to fulfill its obligations under this Amended HCP. BLM shall likewise include in annual budget requests sufficient funds to fulfill its obligations under the Implementation Agreement and this Amended HCP.”</p> <p>Comment: This paragraph should be removed from the HCP. It has no relevance with respect to the Applicant’s HCP activities. Furthermore, the Applicants cannot speak for these agencies, have no management authority over these agencies, and cannot promise that these actions will happen in the future or for how long.</p>
217	127	Chapter 9	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We are dismayed to read the proponent-biased rhetoric given at the top of page 127 that “a deal is a deal,” in favor of the HCP Partner beneficiaries, when that part of the “deal” that should guarantee tortoise conservation and recovery – the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve – is expressly no longer part of the deal. We construe that such a statement appearing in this Amended HCP is evidence that the authors have not fully considered the significant ramifications of gutting the 1995 HCP by facilitating freeway development as part of the 2020 revised HCP. That, and the County is confident of achieving its desired results to develop the Northern Corridor with most of the burden being mitigated on SITLA and the BLM lands in pursuing the Zone 6 compromise. It would seem that No Surprises, as used in this planning process and resulting Amended HCP, applies only to the proponent and not to the tortoise.</p>
218	127	9.1	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We note that the two examples given for Changed Circumstances on page 127 – “(e.g., the listing of new species, or a fire or other natural catastrophic event in areas prone to such events)” and a third on page 136 “(i.e., delisting the desert tortoise)” – are unforeseen, stochastic events, and unlikely but desirable results, respectively, that cannot be anticipated. We ask that the authors of the Amended HCP expand this discussion to document examples of previous Changed Circumstances that were used as a mechanism to promote foreseeable projects that would not occur <i>but for</i> a completely discretionary action like the Northern Corridor. We believe that the intent of the Changed</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					Circumstance clause was to deal with circumstances that are beyond the control of the Permittee and Applicant, that it was never intended – as is currently being proposed – to accommodate actions that undermine conservation and recovery of covered species.
219	127	9.1.1	NA	NA	Text: “The proposed Northern Corridor is described in a Plan of Development submitted to the BLM with an application for a ROW across BLM-managed lands within Reserve Zone 3.” Comment: Please update this information to include that there are now several alternatives including avoiding the Reserve.
220	127-141	9.1	NA	NA	Comment: Changed Circumstances Rule Federal Register 2-23-1998 - “Many changes in circumstances during the course of an HCP can reasonably be anticipated and planned for in the conservation plan (<i>e.g.</i> , the listing of new species, or a fire or other natural catastrophic event in areas prone to such events), and the plans should describe the modifications in the project or activity that will be implemented if these circumstances arise.” We know fires will continue to occur until non-native invasive species are eliminated and human-caused fires are curtailed. In addition, <u>recurring</u> fires should be a Changed Circumstance with fire prevention, fire suppression, and habitat restoration of recently burned areas a biological objective. Unfortunately, human-caused and lightning-caused fires should be expected to occur in the UVRU because of ongoing human actions that introduce non-native invasive plant species to the area , recurring actions that promote their growth, and failure of land management agencies to implement actions to suppress their growth/reproduction.
221	128	9.1.1	NA	NA	Text: “The County and the HCP Partners would establish a new Reserve Zone 6 in the vicinity of the former Bloomington incidental take area located to the west of Interstate 15 and south of the Santa Clara River. The new Reserve Zone 6 would include approximately 6,813 acres of primarily SITLA-owned or BLM-managed lands. The County would fund the acquisition of a portion of the non-federal lands within Reserve Zone 6. The funding would be enough to acquire three times the acreage of land within the proposed Northern Corridor roadway ROW.” Comment: Issues with this statement that need to be clarified, as it is currently unclear what actions would be taken to implement this Changed Circumstance, follow: What does “a portion of non-federal lands” mean? How much of the 49 percent of the non-federal lands would be

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>acquired?</p> <p>Acquiring three times the acreage of the ROW does not begin to minimize and mitigate the indirect adverse effects to the tortoise from the construction, use, and maintenance of this freeway. These effects extend far beyond the ROW of the roadway. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • road effect zone; • new sources of food for ravens from wildlife “roadkill” on a new highway that attracts more ravens to the Reserve and likely increasing tortoise mortality; • spread and proliferation of nonnative plant species transported along highways, thus requiring more management and funding by Washington County in Zone 3 to control these species; • fragmentation of the tortoise population south of the new highway and its eventual loss because of its small size and stochastic events; • increase in fire frequency because of the presence of vehicles that start many fires in the Mojave Desert (Brooks and Matchett 2006) (e.g., Turkey Farm Road and Cottonwood Trail fires); • increase in fire size because of the proliferation of non-native invasive plant species; • increased, planned-for availability and ease of human access to Zone 3 of the Reserve providing new opportunities for tortoise collection, vandalism, and source of human-caused fire; and, • increased levels of nitrogen from vehicle operation along the Northern Corridor contributing to the growth and proliferation of non-native invasive plant species over native species. <p>The presence of one or more of these factors will result in much greater incidental take of MDT and tortoise habitat than from highway construction (i.e., the footprint of the highway). The HCP needs to demonstrate how it is minimizing and mitigating to offset these impacts.</p> <p>Issues with information provided on management of Zone: 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More than 90 percent of the land is state or BLM owned and is outside the NCA. The BLM land is an ACEC, which means little with respect to managing the lands for the benefit of the tortoise. The BLM in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) designated ACECs for the tortoise with some land use limitations in 2006 (and earlier),

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>then designated them as Tortoise Conservation Areas in 2016.They continue to experience dramatic declines in density and numbers. Despite these data, BLM amended their CDCA Plan in 2019 to expand the number and miles of authorized routes for OHV use.</p> <p>This history by BLM provides little assurance that BLM’s management would result in a measurable benefit for the tortoise and its habitat in Zone 6. To ensure a measurable benefit, the land management designation for BLM land would need to be changed to include a conservation easement to manage the land for the benefit and recovery of the tortoise in perpetuity because the development is long term. In the absence of revised RMPs, the HCP is promising conservation that we, the affected public, cannot assess.</p> <p>Issues with adverse effects information provided on Zone 6 Currently the language is vague regarding the specific commitments for acquisition and management of Zone 6. This means it is unenforceable. The following information as a minimum should be added to this Changed Circumstance to better define what would be implemented:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the current and future uses that would be allowed in Zone 6 regardless of ownership? To be managed for the benefit and recovery of the tortoise, activities that adversely affect tortoises and/or tortoise habitat (e.g., grazing, motorized and non-motorized OHV use, shooting, long-term camping, competitive events, events attracting a large number of people, any form of surface disturbance, etc.) would need to be prohibited in Zone 6, existing surface disturbance restored to native habitat, and management sufficiently funded to improve, then maintain the habitat and restore any habitat degraded or destroyed directly or indirectly by human-caused activities (e.g., fire, nonnative plant species, human subsidized predation, etc.). - Where are the data and detailed maps (e.g., size, shape and edge effects/connectivity to other occupied habitat that would be acquired by Washington County) that support Washington County’s planned acquisition and management in perpetuity of Zone 6? For example, although the size (i.e. total acres) of the Reserve would increase by 10 percent, if there is limited or no connectivity to the actual Reserve, if the land is a patchwork of undeveloped and developed acres, etc. so there is much edge effect, if the area has and would continue to have uses that are incompatible with

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>management of tortoises and tortoise habitat (e.g., shooting, OHV activity, etc.), and there is no permanent guarantee of management for the benefit of the tortoise (e.g., current ACEC designation can be changed and funding is not guaranteed), then the total acres have little contribution to tortoise recovery and likely do not minimize and mitigate to the maximum extent practicable all the direct and indirect effects from construction, use, and maintenance of the highway through Zone 3 of the Reserve (e.g., mortality and injury from vehicle collisions, creating a wildlife road-kill food source to subsidize and grow a raven population that preys on tortoises, increased spread of nonnative plant species promoting their growth in the Reserve, increasing occurrence of fires because of the increase presence of vehicles and people, fragmentation of the largest contiguous portion of tortoise habitat in the Reserve and creating an isolated population of tortoises south of the proposed road that would likely succumb to stochastic events and disappear), much less the take of tortoises from 60,000 more acres.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where is the demographic data on tortoise genetics, population size, density, size class, sex ratio and trend for these demographic parameters for Zone 6? - Where is the map of habitat quality including abundance and density of nonnative plant species, extent of human-caused surface disturbance, and woody plant cover and species composition for Zone 6? - How does the habitat in Zone 6 compare to Zone 3 habitat (i.e., is it typical Mojave desert scrub habitat or habitat unique to the Red Cliffs area)? - Will endowment and enhancement funds be established to provide for its management for the tortoise in perpetuity? - Where is the comparison of all acres impacted from the road effect zone by the construction and use of the Northern Corridor and fragmentation of tortoises/tortoise habitat in Zone 3 with the acres to be acquired by the County in Zone 6? Absent this information, it is impossible to determine if these proposed actions by the County are adequate to mitigate for the short-term and long-term loss of tortoises (the small isolated population between the proposed Northern Corridor route and existing development to the south is likely to result in the loss of all tortoises and miscellaneous other wildlife species south of the freeway). <p>The Changed Circumstances section of the HCP should answer the questions asked above, clearly state in <u>quantifiable</u> terms the specific actions that would be implemented under the HCP, and analyze how they would</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					minimize and mitigate all adverse effects of the Northern Corridor. This information is needed by the USFWS for their analysis in the Biological Opinion and Findings documents.
222	130	9.1.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: We found no information in this section on the habitat for the MDT. Please describe the habitat including topography, soils, cover and density of woody and native annual vegetation, density and cover of nonnative annual plant species, and map areas that are degraded and damaged by surface disturbance and structures. Although presented in the Draft EIS, it is essential that this information also appear in the 2020 Amended HCP document, particularly since it is not addressed in the 1995 HCP document.
223	130	9.1.1.1	NA	NA	Comment: This section provides data on the number and density of MDTs from survey results. However, these data are reporting total numbers of tortoises for surveys with no information on the survey method(s) used. The HCP is providing data that are unclear and therefore not comparable to other data in the HCP. Consequently, any conclusions from these data are not supported. Please standardize all data results presented in the HCP and describe the methods used to collect the data. Please do not extrapolate data collected “in the vicinity of the proposed Reserve Zone 6” for the MDT to lands in Zone 6.
224	131	9.1.1.1.2	NA	NA	Text: “The County and the HCP Partners will expand the target acquisition area for the Reserve to include the proposed Reserve Zone 6 boundary.” Comment: Would it not be better for the MDT to acquire lands within Zone 6 and not just the boundary? The word “boundary” needs to be deleted.
225	131	9.1.1.1.2	NA	NA	Text: “The County and the HCP Partners anticipate that the acquisition of SITLA-owned lands within Reserve Zone 6 will use the same mechanisms and be subject to the same provisions as described in Chapter 6.3.1.2.” Comment: Unfortunately, Section 6.3.1.2 Reserve Acquisition Strategy, does not provide information on or a commitment to acquire lands prior to or commensurate with the indirect impacts to the MDT from implementation of construction, use, and maintenance of the Northern Corridor. This commitment needs to be added to Section 9.1.1.1.2.
226	131	9.1.1.1.2	NA	NA	Text: “The County and the USFWS acknowledge that the use of ESA Section 6 funds to support the acquisition of Reserve Zone 6 is an acceptable use of this federal grant program, since this conservation measure is in response to a Changed Circumstance affecting the conservation value of the original Reserve, rather than a mitigation measure

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>necessary to address incidental take from a Covered Activity.”</p> <p>Comment: We cannot agree with this statement given the combined efforts of UDOT, Washington County, and BLM to allow dedicated conservation lands to accommodate the Northern Corridor. Until there is a requirement that these lands purchased for conservation purposes must remain for this purpose and cannot be changed, this is not an appropriate use of federal grant monies.</p>
227	131	9.1.1.1.3	NA	NA	<p>Text: “...the County and the HCP Partners will restrict the Covered Activities applicable to Reserve Zone 6 to only those allowed uses described in Chapter 2.2 with respect to recreation uses and related facilities when performed in accordance with the PUP (to be amended as described below); utilities, access roads, water development, and flood control when performed in accordance with the Development Protocols; and general Reserve management when performed in accordance with this Amended HCP or long-term management guidance (e.g., BLM RMPs). In addition, the following zone-specific allowed uses will be established for the proposed Reserve Zone 6:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • existing state and local government infrastructure and uses; and • competitive use events that have the approval of a special recreation permit issued by the appropriate land management entity or the HCP Administrator, as applicable.” <p>Comment: This section is unclear. Does it only apply to recreation uses? Competitive events are not allowed in the Reserve because of their impacts on tortoise/tortoise habitat. This would further reduce the ability of these lands to minimize and mitigate the incidental take outside the Reserve from construction, use, and maintenance of the Northern Corridor and all take associated with it from indirect impacts (road effect zone, new source of nitrogen to promote the growth of non-native invasive plants, increasing the likelihood of fires from the presence of vehicles (see Brooks and Matchett 2006), fragmentation of the tortoise population such that the small population created and isolated south of the Northern Corridor would likely become extirpated from genetic, demographic, and environmental stochastic events, and the growth-inducing impacts of a new roadway to surrounding areas. One could argue the lands cannot be developed because they are mostly managed by BLM. However, most of California City, California was BLM land at one time. BLM has a history of divesting itself of lands it finds difficult to manage. The HCP fails to demonstrate how it is minimizing and mitigating to the maximum extent practicable the impacts of the taking of the tortoise requirements in the 1994 Recovery Plan and reiterated in the 2011 Revised Recovery Plan from</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					the implementation of the Northern Corridor.
228	131-134	9.1.1.1.4	13	NA	Comment: All of our concerns relative to fencing, law enforcement, community outreach and education, development protocols, recreation management, and fire management also apply to this section under Conservation Actions.
229	132	9.1.1.1.4	NA	NA	Text: “The amount of MDT Habitat within the Reserve that may be permanently lost to Covered Activities will not exceed 200 acres over the duration of the Renewed/Amended ITP Term (page 57 of the Amended HCP).” Comment: We note on page 3-12 of the DEIS Volume 2 in Table 3.2-2 that the impact acreage identified for the UDOT proposal is 240 acres, compared to 150 acres cited on page 132 of the Amended HCP. A third impact acreage of 200 acres is given above. What is the explanation for these discrepancies? Table 3.2-3 on page 3-13 of the DEIS estimates that the indirect effects of this proposal would affect 3,879 acres of tortoise habitats. The naïve reader may be led to believe that acquisition of 450 acres (which should be 720 acres if the 240-acre figure in the DIES is to be believed) sounds adequate, but more informed readers understand that acquiring 450 acres of SITLA lands that have not been targeted for development in the last 24 years is a minimal commitment by the County, and dismisses that the actual impacts of the Reserve are far more than either 150, 200, or 240 acres (whichever figure turns out to be accurate). And since the County has clearly stated it is not responsible to acquire the SITLA lands, its good faith effort to minimize the impact of the Northern Corridor is in question.
230	132	9.1.1.1.4	NA	NA	Text: “Both of these alternatives [in the NCA RMP] would modify REC-5 to manage a 600-foot-wide area along the selected Northern Corridor as part of the Rural RMZ, which allows for operational components such as paved roads where visitors ‘ can expect a steady stream of highway auto and truck traffic ’” (emphasis added). Comment: We note the above statement given on page 3-132 of the DEIS. We interpret this statement to mean that an area 600 feet wide – not 300 feet wide – would be directly impacted. If perimeter fences will be installed to encompass a width of 600 feet for the 4.0-mile-long freeway, it is our calculation that 298 acres would be removed from tortoise use, not 150 (or 200, or 240, or some other acreage). Please clarify.
231	132	9.1.1.1.4	NA	NA	Comment: Both the DEIS (see page 2-15) and the Amended HCP (page 57) state that the compensation ratios derived from the 1991 Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group (DTMOG) formula are being used to determine compensation. However, neither document reveals that the HCP Partners have, in fact, not chosen to implement the

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>multiplying factor sum resulting from the compensation formula. As given on page 7 of that formula, there are five variables, the sum of which is used to multiply the acreage of impact to determine compensation. (Note: Nowhere else in the listed range of the tortoise does <i>anyone</i> still use this 1991 DTMOG formula. In all four states where Critical Habitats or acreage within DWMA's are impacted, the standard compensation ratio is 5:1). These variables and the numbers applicable to the Northern Corridor follow:</p> <p>C = Category of Habitat = Category 1, which is synonymous with Critical Habitat = 3 T = Term of Effect = > 10 years = 1 E = Existing Disturbance Onsite = Little or no disturbed habitat = 1 G = Growth Inducing = None = 0, Yes = 0.5 A = Adjacent Habitat Impacts = Direct or Indirect Effects in Adjacent Areas = 0.5 Total = 5.5</p> <p>Since it can be argued that the Northern Corridor is growth-accommodating rather than growth-inducing, that value may very well equal zero for Variable G, but that still leaves an undisputed multiplying factor of 5.5. Although we have persuasively argued that the Northern Corridor is not compatible with tortoise conservation and recovery on Critical Habitats inside the Reserve and that it violates the assumptions of the 1995 HCP, we see here that the HCP Partners are promoting a compensation ratio of 3:1, claiming to use the DTMOG formula as the basis for that calculation, but failing to follow the calculated ratio of a minimum of 5.5:1. As given above, there are already conflicting estimates of the direct impacts of the Northern Corridor (300 feet versus 600 feet wide areas), but no explanation why the HCP Partners are choosing to claim adherence to the DTMOG formula, not doing so, and promoting a compensation ratio of 3:1 rather than 5.5:1; offering to acquire 450 acres, when in fact the formula they reference indicates a compensation ratio of 5.5:1, which would be a minimum of 825 acres (for a 300-foot wide impact) to as much as 1,639 acres (for a 600-foot wide loss of tortoise habitat). Failure to divulge this dynamic (and numerous other instances given herein) strongly suggest that the HCP Partners do not fully acknowledge the impact of the freeway through the Reserve (and to public trust), and whether they do or not, are looking for every means possible to develop the freeway with a minimum cost to the County.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
232	132	9.1.1.1.4	NA	NA	Comment: With regards to reserve fencing discussed in the 3 rd bullet on page 132, we note that although this section relates to Zone 6, there is no discussion in this section that the new Northern Corridor would also be fenced, which would have deleterious effects in terms of fragmentation and “beneficial” effects in minimizing road-killed tortoises (which would not occur <i>but for</i> the Changed Circumstance/Northern Corridor the HCP Partners are now promoting).
233	135	9.1.1.1	NA	NA	Text: “Upon the triggering of this Changed Circumstance, the County will retire approximately 3,338 acres of incidental take previously authorized by the USFWS and otherwise renewed with this Amended HCP and Renewed/Amended ITP.” Comment: Though not directly revealed, we understand this statement is referring to the SITLA lands in Zone 6. Given that these lands have remained intact for many years, and presumably since the 1995 drafting of the HCP (please confirm), there has been no intent to sell them. We ask that the Amended HCP (or perhaps more appropriately in the DEIS?) document the acreage of SITLA lands within the Plan Area and how many SITLA lands have actually been sold since 1995. These data will reveal the actual threat, and therefore conservation benefit, of including these lands in Zone 6. If there is no actual likelihood that these lands will be purchased and subsequently developed, we question the conservation value of retiring these lands from take authorization. Furthermore, it is our understanding that SITLA is under NO legal obligation to sell or “give” lands to HCP partners like the BLM or UDWR; there are still SITLA lands within the core of the Reserve (since 1995) and the only way they will be sold to HCP partners is under congressional legislation. So, we ask that the Final EIS provide more discussion as to how exactly SITLA is obligated to participate as envisioned and as they pertain to our comments.
234	135	9.1.1.2	NA	NA	Text: “To compensate for fragmentation effects of the proposed Northern Corridor, the County and the HCP Partners will provide technical assistance to UDOT for the design and construction of tortoise-crossing culverts under Cottonwood Road within Reserve Zone 3.” Comment: With regards to the above statement, we ask that more detail be provided. How long has this road been fenced? And, depending on the answer, why haven’t the HCP Partners not already implemented this action? We understand from elsewhere in the Amended HCP (e.g., page xi in the Executive Summary) that as of January 2020, there are in excess of seven million dollars available to implement conservation actions such as this one. The Council does not recognize this as a measure that will offset development of the Northern Corridor, because existing science

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					should have dictated this action be implemented already. We feel that this is an important consideration, as this conservation action is in a section that is intended to address the Changed Circumstance. There is no conservation credit in linking this overdue action with development of the Northern Corridor, as there is no clear nexus between the Changed Circumstance and this long overdue action.
235	135	9.1.1.2	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The County will also provide funding to support the construction, maintenance, and/or monitoring of tortoise-crossing culverts under Cottonwood Road.”</p> <p>Comment: Maintenance, monitoring, and adaptive management (we note no commitment to adaptive management of culverts) are needed after construction to ensure that this action is effective in accomplishing its purpose. This is another example of the Applicants’ failure to fully fund implementation of conservation actions including monitoring, maintenance, and adaptive management.</p>
236	137	9.1.4	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Another Changed Circumstance from the Northern Corridor would be the frequency of fire in the Reserve. As presented earlier, Brooks and Matchett (2006) reported car fires along roadsides are frequent causes of fires in the Mojave Desert. The County should develop and implement conservation actions, mitigation, and appropriate funding to efficiently and effectively implement actions to prevent fires, quickly extinguish fires, and quickly restore native habitat for areas in the Reserve that may experience fires in the future. For example, if constructed, multiple phone call stations could be constructed along the Northern Corridor to facilitate early reporting of fires in adjacent habitats. Restoration activities should also occur for areas that have experienced fire in the Reserve. Some of these actions include substantial reduction in nonnative plant species, increased law enforcement and education about this issue, modifications to the fire management plan to address ways these types of fires can be prevented and quickly extinguished, and effective habitat restoration of burned areas using only native plants (both woody perennial and herbaceous annual plants). The commitment in this section of the HCP only deals with one aspect of this Changed Circumstance, which is restoration. It is far less expensive economically and ecologically to prevent fires than to fight a fire and restore areas after a fire. Consequently, this Changed Circumstance should identify and adequately fund fire prevention in and near the Reserve with implementation of on-the-ground management actions, law enforcement, and public education, and prohibitions of activities such as campfires, firework, etc. in the Reserve. During high fire danger the Reserve should be closed to public access.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
237	137	9.1.4	NA	NA	Comment: The first paragraph in this section that summarizes potential incidences of wildfire in the Reserve fails to divulge that roads, particularly highways, are what Brooks and Matchett (2006) designate as “Ignition Point Locations,” as mapped in Figure 1 on page 151 of their document. This is an essential part of the analysis that is missing, as development of the Northern Corridor, itself, based on these data and research, is likely to contribute to the incidence of fire in the Reserve in a location where that threat is absent <i>but for</i> the new freeway. Clearly, this section in the Amended HCP needs to be modified to include the ramifications of two wildfires occurring in July 2020, including the Turkey Farm Road and Cottonwood Trail fires, as existing Changed Circumstances since drafting the document.
238	129 139	9.1.1 9.1.7	NA	NA	Comment: Since Section 9.1.1 of the Amended HCP claims that it intends to enlarge the Reserve by 10% (redesignating the satellite reserve in Zone 6 is implied), shouldn’t Section 9.1.7 reveal that it is possible that SITLA lands in Zone 6 can still be purchased and developed? It is not clear from our reading of the Amended HCP or the DEIS that SITLA is expressly prohibited from selling these lands even if within the proposed Zone 6 satellite reserve. Please confirm in the Final EIS.
239	139	9.1.6	NA	NA	Text: “Therefore, this Changed Circumstance will be triggered if a new MDT disease is detected within the Plan Area or if the observed incidence of URTD among MDT Reserve-wide exceeds 25% of the population.” Comment: According to the 2016 HCP Handbook, “Changed circumstances are circumstances that can be reasonably anticipated.” They can be anticipated because of past and current scientific knowledge about the species and the Plan Area. This section only describes two of the recently identified diseases that occur in the MDT. It should include all known diseases of the MDT (e.g., herpesvirus, shell disease, etc.). Otherwise this selected approach appears to be arbitrary and purposefully ignoring some diseases in the MDT, and should not be considered an informed Changed Circumstance.
240	139	9.1.6	NA	NA	Text: “The County, UDWR, and the USFWS will meet and confer to discuss alternative translocation options and possible treatment for affected tortoises, subject to financial constraints and practicability.” Comment: Thus, in dealing with the Changed Circumstance of disease for the tortoise, the Permittee is only concerned about the tortoises it needs to move to allow for development. There is no Changed Circumstance to implement appropriate management actions for MDT in the Reserve that are outside translocation zones. We are not

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					<p>sure how the Permittee’s commitment in this Changed Circumstance is minimizing and mitigating the impacts of the taking for tortoises in the development areas. Please add a commitment of what minimization and mitigation action the Permittee will implement if “a new MDT disease is detected within the Plan Area (this includes the Reserve) or if the observed incidence of URTD among MDT Reserve-wide exceeds 25% of the population.”</p> <p>In addition, why was 25% of the population selected? This selected number appears to be arbitrary, as we found no epidemiological reference to support it. Please revise this Changed Circumstance to reflect what is known about current tortoise diseases as they all suppress the tortoise’s immune system and leave it more vulnerable to mortality from the disease of other sources of mortality (i.e., it is a contributing factor to mortality).</p>
241	141	9.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: Although the Amended HCP has not convinced us that the Northern Corridor is a Changed Circumstance (because the HCP Partners have postponed ITP issuance for four years for the sole purpose of developing this compromise, and our understanding is that Changed Circumstances are beyond the control of the HCP Partners), we fully believe that the Northern Corridor is an Unforeseen Circumstance relative to the 1995 HCP, which until it is revised, remains enforce (e.g., the words “northern corridor” do not appear in the 503-page 1995 HCP, unless it was referred to under a different title?). We support our conclusion based on the clauses used in the second paragraph on page 141 of the Amended HCP: The Northern Corridor, which was not envisioned by the 1995 HCP represents “...modifications within conserved habitat areas” and it expressly does not “...maintain the original terms of the conservation plan to the maximum extent possible.” So, please explain why the Northern Corridor is not an Unforeseen Circumstance relative to the 1995 HCP.</p>
242	141	9.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The HCP Handbook says “The ‘unforeseen circumstances’ section of the HCP should discuss the process for figuring out how to address those future changes in circumstances surrounding the HCP [the USFWS] may not reasonably anticipate.” We found no such discussion in this section of the Amended HCP. We found one sentence that said “The USFWS shall notify the County in writing of any Unforeseen Circumstances the USFWS believes to exist.” The County can and should include a discussion of the process they will conduct with the USFWS and others to address unforeseen circumstances. As stated in the 2016 Handbook, “There may be other approaches [the USFWS] can use to respond to the needs of the affected species, including increasing the effectiveness of the HCP’s operating</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					conservation program (without raising costs), Government actions [the USFWS] can take to meet species needs, or voluntary conservation measures the permittee can take.” We request a discussion of the process be added to the Amended HCP.
243	143	10.2	NA	NA	<p>Comment: For the purposes of full disclosure, we ask that the following sentence be modified to indicate that the Northern Corridor would also result in the adverse modification of designated tortoise Critical Habitat, or, at least, the USFWS needs to consider this aspect of the Changed Circumstance (see suggested wording in bold font). “Therefore, even under this alternative, the Northern Corridor involves federal actions that may affect, and would be likely to adversely effect, the MDT (with incidental take and adverse modification of Critical Habitat) and would trigger the need for formal interagency consultation under Section 7 of the ESA.”</p> <p>“The Service [USFWS] expects that proposed actions that are inconsistent with land management recommendations for DWMA’s in the Draft Recovery Plan would likely be considered to adversely modify critical habitat. Proposed actions that are consistent with the recommendations within the Draft Recovery Plan would not be likely to result in destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat (59 Federal Register 26:5835).”</p>
Development Protocols, Appendix A to the Amended HCP					
244	C-5	App A	NA	NA	<p>Comment: We appreciate that the Development Protocols as they pertain to tortoise surveys, findings, and dispositions are well written and should prove effective. With regards to the following sentence on page C-5, we recommend adding the bold regular-font words for clarification: “A qualified biologist shall excavate any winter dens or burrows which the HCP Biologist has concluded cannot be avoided and will be disturbed by construction, checking for nests and viable eggs as the burrows are excavated.”</p>
245	C-6	App A	NA	NA	<p>Comment: With regards to the following prescription, “GC-11 The area shall be restored as determined during the preconstruction process, consistent with restoration/reclamation standards approved by the Washington County Commission. [Document in progress],” in 2016 the Council completed Best Management Practices in a peer-reviewed document relative to restoration of tortoise habitats (Abella and Berry 2016), and has included those BMPs for consideration and use by the HCP Partners in Attachment E.</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
246	C-7	App A	NA	NA	Comment: We suggest that the following statement on page C-7 be supplemented with the bold-font wording that follows, “If tortoises are found in the drainage area and are determined to be in harm’s way, a qualified biologist will move the tortoises to a sheltered location within 250 feet outside the wash. If there is a burrow of an adult tortoise that will be flooded, a knowledgeable biologist should consider the potential for the occurrence of a viable tortoise nest and take necessary precautions (e.g., reroute the flow water or excavate the burrow) to avoid losing the eggs.”
247	C-4 C-8	App A	NA	NA	Comment: It is advisable that the PC-6 prescription given on pages C-4/C-5 with regards to an educational brochure and signed affidavit also be applied to prescription M-2 on page C-8 as it pertains to an annual refresher course administered for maintenance personnel.
248	C-9	App A	NA	NA	Comment: With regards to freshly dead tortoises, it is advisable that UDWR and/or USGS be contacted to see if they can use fresh specimens for research. If this recommendation is followed, it would be appropriate to add the nearest USGS office (likely Las Vegas area?) contact information to page C-12. Also, since the HCP is intended to function for 25 years, we question if the inclusion of named biologists is prudent? Finally, we recommend that the section clarify the disposition of <i>dead</i> animals (as stated, final disposition pertains only to injured, living tortoises). Leaving freshly-dead tortoises in place may attract predator-scavengers.
249	C-13	App A	NA	NA	Comment: With regards to the clearance survey protocol revisions since 1997 given on page C-13, we recommend that Chapter 6 in the USFWS (2009) Field Manual be consulted to be sure the County is implementing the most recent guidance.
Red Cliffs Desert Reserve Public Use Plan, Appendix B to the Amended HCP					
250	14	App B	NA	NA	Text: “The Red Cliffs Desert Reserve Public Use Plan is designed to be flexible and subject to revision through adaptive management. After management prescriptions are implemented, monitoring will ensure the success of habitat management by evaluating and updating prescriptions when necessary to continue to meet conservation goals. If the Plan fails to meet conservation goals, the County, BLM and Reserve administrators will assess and refine management prescriptions using adaptive management provisions on page 17.” Comment: Because the conservation goals of the 1995 HCP have not been met (i.e., resulted in stable or increasing

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

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					populations of tortoises within the Reserve), and this has been known for several years (e.g., results of bi-annual desert tortoise surveys by UDWR since 1998; see Attachment B), please provide information the HCP regarding what adaptive management actions have been implemented to address the results of each monitoring effort for the MDT/tortoise habitat.
251	25	App B	NA	NA	<p>Text: “Members of the Technical Committee and the Public Use Planning Team have recognized and recommended that a human impact monitoring plan be launched after careful analysis and design that both quantifies and documents human impacts in the Reserve.”</p> <p>Comment: Since it was identified in the 2000 PUP, 20 years ago, we question why this monitoring plan is not included in the 2020 HCP.</p>
252	29	App B	NA	NA	<p>Text: “The HCP Administrator, in coordination with Reserve managers, USFWS, UDWR, and Wildlife Services, can authorize appropriate persons or groups to conduct programs to manage predators, nuisance animals, and exotic, noxious plant and wildlife species. Examples include authorizing qualified hunters to control coyote, mountain lion, raven and beaver populations, or authorizing the use of herbicides for noxious weed control. Administrative control of certain species is important for protecting tortoise populations, protecting other beneficial wildlife and plant species, and for human safety reasons.”</p> <p>Comment: Since this statement was taken from the 2000 PUP, the Applicants recognized the threats to the MDT cause by excessive predation and invasive plants 20 years ago. Please explain why management of these threats is not included in the 2020 HCP. Please add these as biological objectives and specific conservation actions.</p>
253	33-46	App B	NA	NA	<p>Comment: The PUP, adopted in 2000, should be revised based on information collected about threats to the MDT and their impacts on tortoise/tortoise habitat. For example, the 2000 PUP allows for campfires in the lowland zone of the Reserve but in the upland zone, this area is subject to closures during times of high fire danger. Because of the recent fire history in the lowland zone, it appears this closure should apply to the lowland zone too.</p> <p>Organized and Competitive Events – “Organized competitive and recreational sporting events found to be low-impact to habitat are only permitted in the Reserve with a special use permit issued by the BLM or State Parks in coordination with the HCP Administrator.” We were under the impression that these events were no longer allowed</p>

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Northern Corridor EIS, HCP, and RMP
Comment Tracking Form**

Comment #	Page Number	Section Number	Figure Number	Table Number	Comment and/or Reference
					in the Reserve. If correct, please update the 2000 PUP to reflect current management practices and restrictions. Otherwise, this incorrect document should not be included as an appendix of the 2020 HCP. It is confusing.
254	65	App B	NA	NA	Comment: We were unable to find Appendices A through F of the PUP. Please include the following in the Amended HCP: Designated Roads Within the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve; HCP Directives by Zone; Recreation Ecology and Human Impacts to Resources: A Primer, the Ecology of the Desert Tortoise; Impacts of Recreation on the Desert Tortoise and Other Wildlife in the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve; and Comments on the Public Use Plan Draft March 14, 2000. This information is relevant to the development of the 2020 HCP.
Reserve Habitat and Fire Management Plan, Appendix D to the Amended HCP					
255	NA	App D	NA	NA	Comment: Although written in 2019, it appears that the authors did not consult with persons who have studied fires in the southwestern deserts of the United States. We contend that past methods for containing fires in one environmental area (e.g., fire breaks) are not appropriate or effective in a desert fire fueled by dried annual grasses and wind. We suggest consulting with experts (e.g., the U.S. Geological Survey's Wildland Fire Science in Forests and Deserts, etc.) to determine the most effective methods to prevent the occurrence and spread of fire in the Mojave Desert and effective restorations efforts and updating this plan periodically as research continues to provide new information.
Translocation Management Plan, Appendix E to the Amended HCP					
256	NA	App E	NA	NA	Please see Comment 197 above, with regards to Section 6.3.2.4 Tortoise Translocation of the 2020 HCP.

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² Here we retain the “2019^d” because that is how it appears in the quote.

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Attachment A - List of Acronyms Used in Our Comment Tables

ACEC – Area of Critical Environmental Concern
AUM – Animal Units per Month (relative to grazing)
BLM – Bureau of Land Management
BO – Biological Opinion
CDCA – California Desert Conservation Area
CFR – Code of Federal Regulations
DEIS/Draft EIS – Draft Environmental Impact Statement
DOI – Department of Interior
DTMOG – Desert Tortoise Management Oversight Group
DTRP - Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan
DWMA – Desert Wildlife Management Area
ERMA - Extensive Recreation Management Area
FESA/ESA – Federal Endangered Species Act
FLMPA – Federal Land Management Policy Act
GPS - global positioning system
HCAC – Habitat Conservation Advisory Committee
HCP – Habitat Conservation Plan
IA – Implementation (Implementing) Agreement
ITP – [Section 10(a)(1)(B)] Incidental Take Permit
LE – Law Enforcement
LWCF - Land and Water Conservation Fund Act Lands
MDT – Mojave desert tortoise
NA – Not Applicable
NCA – National Conservation Area
NEPA – National Environmental Policy Act
NMFS – National Marine Fisheries Service
OHV – Off-Highway Vehicle
OPLMA - Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009
PEP Index - potassium excretion potential index
PUP – Public Use Plan
RCDR – Red Cliffs Desert Reserve
RCNCA – Red Cliffs National Conservation Area
Reserve – Red Cliffs Desert Reserve
RMP – Resource Management Plan
ROW – Right-of-way
SGFO – St. George Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management
SHC – Strategic Habitat Conservation
SITLA – Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration
SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, result-oriented, and time-fixed
SWCA – Southwest Environmental Consultants
TCA – Tortoise Conservation Area
UDNR – Utah Department of Natural Resources
UDOT – Utah Department of Transportation
UDWR – Utah Department of Wildlife Resources
USFWS – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS – U.S. Geological Survey
UVRU – Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit
WCHCP – Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan
WUI - Wildland Urban Interface

Attachment B

McLuckie, A. M., N.L. Fronk, and R.A. Fridell. 2020. Regional Desert Tortoise Monitoring In The Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, 2019. Publication Number 20-06, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Salt Lake City, Utah.

It is important to note the declines in tortoise densities in Zone 3 from 33.4 per km² in 1998 to 12.3 per km² in 2019 and in Zones 2, 3, and 5 from 29.1 per km² in 1999 to 17.2 per km² in 2019.

Table 5. Sample size of truncated data (n), total line length (L), number of transects (k), density (D; tortoises per km²) and abundance (N; total animals per area sampled) estimates with associated 95% confidence interval, and coefficient of variation (%) for adult desert tortoises (>180 mm) encountered within Zone 3 as well as across the Reserve (Zones 2, 3, and 5), 1998 to 2019, Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, Washington County, Utah.

Zone 3

Year	n	L	K	D (95%CI)	N (95%CI)	CV(%)
1998	124	193.4	99	33.4 (24.4-45.6)	3199-(2343-4369)	15.85
1999	137	215.5	110	33.1 (23.2-47.2)	3173 (2225-4523)	18.09
2000	136	209.3	106	33.8 (24.1-47.5)	3243 (2308-4558)	17.34
2001	147	218.9	111	35.0 (25.9-47.2)	3351 (2481-4525)	15.30
2003	73	215.6	109	17.6 (13.1-23.8)	1690 (1252-2280)	15.26
2005	116	230.7	117	26.2 (19.8-34.5)	2509 (1902-3309)	14.10
2007	76	239.8	122	16.5 (12.2-22.3)	1582 (1168-2142)	15.44
2009	54	241.5	123	11.6 (8.2-16.6)	1116 (782-1592)	18.14
2011	85	239.0	122	18.5 (14.0-24.4)	1775 (1346-2340)	14.09
2013	74	241.0	123	16.0 (11.9-21.4)	1532 (1144-2053)	14.90
2015	63	238.7	123	13.7 (9.9-19.1)	1317 (946-1835)	16.89
2017	71	207.2	105	17.8 (13.1-24.3)	1710 (1256-2327)	15.69
2019	50	211.2	107	12.3 (8.7-17.5)	1181 (830-1682)	18.01

Zones 2, 3, & 5

1999	175	296.0	152	29.11(21.4-39.6)	3404(2504-4627)	15.67
2000	177	290.0	147	30.5 (22.9-40.7)	3568 (2675-4757)	14.68
2001	175	301.8	153	30.7 (23.5-40.2)	3591 (2744-4700)	13.72
2003	97	298.8	151	16.5 (12.6-21.5)	1926 (1476-2512)	13.55
2005	158	293.7	149	26.2 (20.2-34.0)	3067 (2364-3979)	13.28
2007	98	296.4	151	16.7 (12.6-22.0)	1948 (1475-2573)	14.18
2009	85	298.5	152	13.7 (10.1-18.6)	1603 (1183-2172)	15.49
2011	116	298.9	153	19.1 (14.9-24.6)	2238 (1742-2874)	12.76
2013	104	302.6	155	16.9 (12.7-22.3)	1971 (1490-2608)	14.28
2015	92	300.2	155	15.0 (11.2-20.1)	1751 (1308-2345)	14.90
2017	105	266.2	136	19.1 (14.7-24.8)	2231 (1716-2900)	13.36
2019	96	262.0	133	17.2 (12.3-24.1)	2011 (1433-2821)	17.28

**Attachment C to the Desert Tortoise Council's September 2020 Comments on the
May 2020 Revised Habitat Conservation Plan for Washington County, Utah
Final Draft Restated and Amended May 2020 and Associated Implementing Agreement**

**MAY 2020 REVISED HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN FOR WASHINGTON
COUNTY, UTAH**

[Comments on Pages 28-31 of 2020 HCP, Section on U.S. Geological Survey Model with Approximate 1995 Development Conditions, Figures 4 and 5, and Table 5: related sections throughout the HCP, and other sections in the Habitat Conservation Plan where the model is used]

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) habitat model (Nussear et al. 2009) was developed for what was thought at the time to be the much of the range of the Mojave desert tortoise species in 2009. It is a model that was developed to map potential tortoise habitat in the Mojave and Sonoran deserts of California, Nevada, Utah, and western Arizona. Since then, we have learned that this area provides habitat for two species of desert tortoises, the Mojave desert tortoise and Sonoran desert tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*). These two species have some overlapping but some different ecological preferences and thus habitat preferences.

For the Mojave desert tortoise: In 2008, a year before the publication of the Nussear et al. (2009) report and model, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) said “Desert tortoises are most commonly found within the desert scrub vegetation type, primarily in creosote bush scrub. In addition, they occur in succulent scrub, cheesebush scrub, blackbrush scrub, hopsage scrub, shadscale scrub, microphyll woodland, Mojave saltbush-allscale scrub and scrub-steppe vegetation types of the desert and semidesert grassland complex (USFWS 2008).

For the Sonoran desert tortoise: In 2011, the USFWS said, the Sonoran distinct population segment of the desert tortoise occurs “most commonly on rocky, steep slopes and bajadas in paloverde-mixed cacti associations. Washes and valley bottoms may be used in dispersal and, in some areas, as all or part of home ranges. Most Sonoran desert tortoises in Arizona occur between 904 to 4,198 feet (275 to 1280 meters) in elevation.” In 2015, the USFWS, acknowledged the Sonoran desert tortoise as a separate species and refined this species habitat description to say, “Sonoran desert tortoises primarily inhabit rocky, steep slopes and bajadas of Mojave Desertscrub and the Arizona Upland and Lower Colorado River subdivisions of Sonoran desertscrub. Ninety-five percent of all Sonoran desert tortoise records in Arizona are located between elevations ranging from approximately 900 to 4,200 feet (ft) (275 to 1,279 meters (m)). They most often occur in the paloverde-mixed cacti associations.”

Furthermore, the ecological conditions in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit vary from those of other tortoise recovery units for the Mojave desert tortoise. The USFWS (1994) said the following of the Mojave desert tortoise in the Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit, “The desert tortoise population in the area of St. George, Utah, is at the extreme northeastern edge of the species’ range and experiences long, cold winters (about 100 freezing days) and mild summers, during which the tortoises are continually active. Here the animals live in a complex topography

consisting of canyons, mesas, sand dunes, and sandstone outcrops where the vegetation is a transitional mixture of Sagebrush Scrub, Creosote Bush Scrub, Blackbush Scrub, and a psammophytic (sandy soil) community. Desert tortoises use sandstone and lava caves instead of burrows, travel to sand dunes for egg laying, and use still other habitats for foraging. Two or more desert tortoises often use the same burrow.” One example of this difference in habitat characteristics is provided in the table below.

Table 3. Topography, substrate, winter burrow site preference, and denning behavior of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) in each recovery unit (USFWS 1994).

Recovery Unit	Physical Attributes of Habitat	Burrow Sites	Denning Behavior
Upper Virgin River	Rock caves, sandstone crevices	Burrows in sand, and in sandstone crevices; (Do not use habitat like NE Mojave, even if available)	Multiple

Nussear et al. 2009. Modeling habitat of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) in the Mojave and parts of the Sonoran Deserts of California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona

[Nussear, K.E., Esque, T.C., Inman, R.D., Gass, Leila, Thomas, K.A., Wallace, C.S.A., Blainey, J.B., Miller, D.M., and Webb, R.H., 2009, Modeling habitat of the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) in the Mojave and parts of the Sonoran Deserts of California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2009-1102, 18 p.]

The 16 environmental variables the authors (Nussear et al. 2009) selected to use in their model were:

CLIMATE

Mean dry season precipitation for 30-year normal period

*Dry season precipitation, spatially distributed coefficient of variation

Mean wet season precipitation for 30-year normal period

*Wet season precipitation, spatially distributed coefficient of variation

TOPOGRAPHY

Elevation (derived from a USGS model)

*Slope (derived from a USGS model)

*Northness (aspect) (derived from a USGS model)

*Eastness (aspect) (derived from a USGS model)

Average surface roughness (derived from a USGS model)

Percent smooth (derived from a USGS model)

*Percent rough (derived from a USGS model)

SOILS

Average soil bulk density (derived from Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) STATSGO database)

Depth to bedrock (derived from NRCS STATSGO database)

Average percentage of rocks > 254 mm B-axis diameter (Derived from NRCS STATSGO database)

BIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Perennial plant cover

Annual growth potential (this is a “proxy for annual plant biomass, which reflects potential forage for tortoises”)

The variables with an “” were dropped from the final model.

“[T]he performance of the model at all possible thresholds and is summarized by a single number ranging from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates perfect model performance, 0.5 indicates the equivalent of a random guess, and less than 0.5 indicates performance worse than random.” Because the model did not use presence and true absence of tortoises, but rather presence and random background points, perfect model performance would be slightly less than 1.”

Assumptions and Limitations in the Nussear et al. (2009) report:

The authors discuss some of the limitations of their data “in quotes.” Others are not discussed in the report.

1. Results of the mapping of potential habitat “do not include factors that affect habitat quality.” Please see discussion below on this.

2. Using the literature and experiences of the authors, 16 environmental variables were selected to predict desert tortoise habitat. In the selection process, the variables “were hypothesized to influence tortoise ecology/habitat potential through a variety of mechanisms.” Ultimately, 6 variables were dropped from the model indicating the selection process of the environmental variables did not have a high level of success.

3. Data were lacking. For example, for the four variables on climate, winter precipitation and summer precipitation, the authors say, “Owing to relatively sparse climatological data for the study area, the range in temperatures and precipitation within the current desert-tortoise habitat is only generally known.” Because data were lacking across the entire study area for some environmental variables, the authors used “spatial interpolation” to cover areas with missing data.

4. Interpolated data may be incorrect. One environmental variable likely affects another. For example, for the environmental variables for climate (e.g., winter precipitation and summer precipitation), the authors say, “[b]oth precipitation and temperature are strongly and complexly related to elevation, aspect, and position within this desert.” Given the variability and localized pattern of rainfall in the Mojave Desert from one location to the next especially in the current drought period (beginning around 2000), this would mean that any interpolation of precipitation occurrences or amounts to fill in areas with missing data were likely not accurate for many locations in the study area unless a complex model was developed and tested.

5. Modeled data for some environmental variables may be untested/incorrect. The absence of data for some environmental variables throughout the study area would suggest the authors may have developed models to produce these completed data layers. For example, total perennial plant cover data were modeled using remote imagery from the “Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) collected by the MODIS satellite and composited over 16-day intervals.” These data were “combined with field measurements of total perennial cover, estimated from line intercept transects at locations across the Mojave Desert, ...and the resulting model was used to extrapolate cover estimates for the remaining study area.” In summary, this model was developed using various sources and types of data at different spatial scales to develop a model that was then extrapolated to calculate total perennial plant cover estimates for the study area.

There is no indication in the report that the models developed or modified by the authors were validated/verified in the field for accuracy prior to their use as environmental data layers. The report indicates that the authors “used a series of innovative techniques... to develop environmental data layers.” Thus, the data layers developed using “a series of innovative techniques” were an extrapolation or modification of existing sparse data. Another way of saying this is untested models/unverified data may have been used to produce a model of potential desert tortoise habitat.

6. One environmental variable was used as a proxy for another. The annual growth potential variable was used as a “proxy for annual plant biomass, which reflects potential forage for tortoises.” The annual plant growth potential data layer was derived by calculating the difference in greenness (a measure of plant growth) between two highly contrasting years of annual plant production using remote sensing imagery.” There is no information in the report on whether the authors were able to discriminate between the greenness of native annual plant production and nonnative annual plant production. This difference is crucial as nonnative annual plants have recently invaded much of the habitat of the Mojave desert tortoise, especially in areas with surface disturbance, and have been documented to dominate the annual plant cover in these areas in some years. In addition, nonnative annual plants have lower nutritive values than native annuals and promote a cycle of wildfires in desert vegetation communities not adapted to fire. Consequently, when identifying potential habitat for the tortoise, it is important to discern the difference between an area with high greenness that is dominated by native annual plants versus an area dominated by nonnative annual plants. Thus, using remote imagery to measure the greenness of an area does not provide data on the availability of native high nutritional quality annual plants species versus nonnative low nutritional quality annual plant species for forage for tortoises.

7. Mapping of potential habitat does not consider the basic tenets of conservation biology regarding the size, shape, and connectivity of patches of habitat to be able to support a viable population. (please see USFWS 1994 below).

Summary of Limitations and Assumptions of Nussenaar et al. (2009) Report and Model:

According to Nussenaar et al. (2009), the “quality of the spatial data used in this report is strongly dependent on the accuracy of previously reported presence points for desert tortoises and on the data used to calculate the environmental layers (emphasis added). Though all possible efforts

were made to create a seamless and robust dataset, discrepancies are unavoidable since data were collected by different groups using different measurement techniques and sampling frequencies. Model scores reflect a hypothesized habitat potential (emphasis added) given the range of environmental conditions where tortoise occurrence was documented. As such, there are likely areas of potential habitat for which habitat potential was not predicted to be high, and likewise, areas of low potential for which the model predicted higher potential. Finally, the map of desert tortoise potential habitat that we present does not account either for anthropogenic effects, such as urban development, habitat destruction, or fragmentation, or for natural disturbances, such as fire, which might have rendered potential habitat into habitat with much lower potential in recent years.”

Because of these many limitations and assumptions, we conclude that the Nussear et al. (2009) report and model does not provide definitive information on whether tortoises would be able to survive long-term at all newly identified habitat locations. We have no data that these locations provide tall their life requisites (food, shelter, reproduction, adequate recruitment and low mortality). Consequently, we request that the information on newly identified/potential tortoise habitat and related calculations including associated figures and tables, be removed from the HCP. These data give the reader an inflated perception of available habitat, when there is no verification of this.

Why only looking at acres of habitat is not an indication of adequate management for a species [Tracy, C.R., R.C. Averill-Murray, W.I. Boarman, D. Delehanty, J.S. Heaton, E.D. McCoy, D.J. Morafka, K.E. Nussear, B.E. Hagerty, and P.A. Medica. 2004. Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan Assessment. Report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Reno, Nevada.]

Types of Habitat Alteration

Habitat Degradation, Reduced Habitat Quality, Fragmentation, and Loss

Habitat Degradation: “Whereas the most obvious threats directly result in tortoise mortality (e.g., road mortality and poaching), the cumulative, interactive, and synergistic impacts of multiple threats is often manifested through indirect impacts that reduce survivorship and fecundity. Habitat degradation and the resulting reduced nutrition are two of those indirect impacts. Habitat degradation takes many forms, and often the occurrence of one form of degradation is correlated with the occurrence of other forms.”

“Three kinds of habitat degradation are centrally important to tortoise conservation and tortoise population decline: habitat fragmentation, habitat loss, and habitat degeneration.”

Fragmentation: “Fragmentation refers to the parsing of habitat into separate segments. This is a spatial phenomenon, but does not refer to habitat loss per se. For example, a fence or road that forms a barrier to tortoise movement divides a tortoise population into two units without significant habitat loss. Habitat fragmentation is an issue of scale and has been shown to cause population declines in other reptiles (Fisher et al. 2002).”

Habitat Loss: “Habitat loss refers to the destruction or conversion of previously suitable habitat into a form that is no longer suitable to tortoises. For example, urbanization leads to habitat loss for desert tortoises. Animals with large home ranges, such as the desert tortoise, typically are sensitive to habitat fragmentation and habitat loss. Both lead to population decline. Among the deleterious effects of habitat fragmentation are reduced movement and gene flow among breeding populations. Fragmenting a population increases the likelihood of local population extinction from a range of demographic and catastrophic events (Opdam 1988, Hanski and Gilpin 1991). Habitat loss does not necessarily fragment a population, but habitat loss invariably leads to population decline due to net loss of space and resources available to tortoises.”

Reduce Habitat Quality: “[H]abitat can degenerate, meaning its value for desert tortoise survival and reproduction is reduced, even if the habitat is not fragmented or destroyed. Reduced habitat quality can be a particularly insidious problem for wildlife managers because it can be difficult to recognize that seemingly suitable habitat is actually deficient in some important way. Habitat fragmentation, loss, and degeneration are all occurring throughout the Mojave Desert.”

Managing Threats

“Focusing on individual threats has resulted in little positive change for desert tortoise populations. The individual threats approach has not contributed to a general recovery of the desert tortoise for several reasons. For example, the individual threats approach generally does not account for compensatory mortality in which one mortality factor takes tortoises that were “saved” from another mortality factor.”

“A particularly troublesome consequence of using the individual threats approach is a problem we term “elevating the expedient to the important.” A simple listing of individual threats may prompt managers to attend first to those threats they view as most tractable, in light of available resources and political exigencies, but managing those threats may not necessarily produce the best results. For example, raven depredation of tortoises appears to be an important problem and raven control is a straightforward management action that can be quickly and easily implemented. However, raven control may not be the highest priority management action for every tortoise population.”

“Finally, focusing on individual threats suffers from Leibig’s Law of the Minimum (Berryman 1993). By focusing on and removing only the one or two threats considered the most important, no response may be realized because the next most important threat becomes the limiting factor for population recovery (Leibig’s Law). Thus, we believe the most effective management will be based on recognizing the importance of addressing the multiplicity of threats impacting specific populations.”

Managing for the long-term viability of a desert tortoise population

[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1994. Desert Tortoise (Mojave Population) Recovery Plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Portland, Oregon.]

The total number of acres of potential or occupied habitat alone does not guarantee the habitat will be able to support viable populations in a recovery unit for the tortoise for the long-term.

The following recovery strategy was presented in the USFWS (1994) Recovery Plan (for the Mojave desert tortoise:

“1. Maintenance of distinct population segments.

The Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit is a distinct population segment. “Preserving viable populations of desert tortoises within each of these units is essential to the long-term recovery, viability, and genetic diversity of the species. Identification of these recovery units also facilitates the tailoring of recovery strategies to the varying biological requirements and management needs of each recovery unit.”

“2. Genetic considerations in population viability.

In small populations, short-term genetic deterioration occurs from inbreeding and loss of genetic heterozygosity (Frankel and Soule 1981, Ralls and Ballou 1983). This genetic deterioration can cause problems in individual fitness and in the population’s ability to increase. In the longer-term, inbreeding depression and loss of heterozygosity can limit the ability of the population to respond adaptively to changes in environment Both of these problems can contribute to the probability of population extinction.”

“3. Demographic considerations in population viability.

In addition to genetic deterioration that can occur at very small population sizes, numerous negative demographic effects can occur when population sizes are small or when their densities are low. When population densities are very low, random variations in sex ratios, age distributions, and birth and death rates among individuals (called demographic stochasticity) can cause the population to fluctuate widely and potentially go extinct (Richter-Dyn and Goel 1972). In very sparse populations, males and females may have problems finding mates. This phenomenon is called the Allee effect, and it also can result in population declines or extinction (Ehrlich and Roughgarden 1987). In desert tortoises, the population densities below which demographic stochasticity and the Allee effect become a matter of concern are estimated to be approximately 10 adults per square mile (See Appendix C). Below this density extinction becomes increasingly possible.”

“Even at much larger sizes, populations can go extinct from a variety of random (stochastic) events, although large populations have a much lower probability of extinction than small ones. Recovery targets should be set at population levels that have comfortable extinction probabilities.” “A population viability analysis (PVA” provides an estimate of how large a population has to be to have a given probability of persistence over a certain period of time.”

“The first PVA modeled population persistence as a function of the discrete population growth rate (λ) and its variance. Using data from 13 study plots (see Appendix C), the average λ was calculated to be 0.985 and its variance 0.08. Using these figures, the model predicted

that 50% of the populations starting with 20,000 adult animals would go extinct within about 500 years, or 20 tortoise generations. This prediction was based upon observed variability in population growth rates during 1979-89, relatively equitable years for desert tortoises, at least with respect to food production. Even so, the average lambda of 0.985 shows that populations declined during these years, although not drastically. However, during 1990 and 1991, population growth rates declined substantially because of the cumulative effects of drought and disease. Thus, an additional analysis was conducted which incorporated greater variability in population growth rates on the assumption that droughts and epizootics are likely to recur during the next few centuries. Increasing the variation in the 1979-89 growth rates by 50% resulted in the model predicting that a minimum population size of approximately 40,000 to 60,000 adult desert tortoises would be required in order for the population to persist for a 500-year median extinction time.”

“4. Comprehensive considerations in population viability.

These analyses of minimal viable populations and population persistence probabilities suggest several things. First, tortoise populations at minimum densities (10 adults per square miles) require at least 200 to 500 square miles to be genetically viable (see Sections II.A.2 and II.A.3). Second, if lambdas are slightly below 1.0 but vary over a range of approximately 25%, extremely large reserves (5,000 square miles to support 50,000 adults at minimal density) are necessary to support populations that are relatively resistant to extinction within the next half century. Third, if lambdas are below 0.975 on average, no population size is large enough for persistence to 500 years.”

“The utility of large reserves in preventing extinction is one of the best established tenets of conservation biology (e.g., Terborgh and Winter 1980; Soule and Simberloff 1986). And, all else being equal, large reserves will conserve more species than small ones (Wilcox 1980; Simberloff and Abele 1982; Wilcove et al. 1986).”

“Large reserves will also facilitate managing desert tortoise populations within the DWMA's to maintain average lambdas of 1.0 or more during the recovery process. Large reserves are more likely to have sufficient internal environmental heterogeneity and enough isolated areas in their interiors to ensure that some subpopulations will be growing even if others are declining. In summary, genetic, demographic, and other considerations point to the inescapable conclusion that small reserves in a highly fragmented habitat are a recipe for extinction of the desert tortoise.”

“5. Reserve architecture

DWMA size is not the only important consideration in determining the probability of success in preserving desert tortoise populations. Principles of reserve design dictate that the shape of DWMA's is also very important (see Section II.D.1.d). Population persistence will be maximized in a recovery unit if the unit has several large DWMA's (each of which is at least 1,000 square miles; see Section II.A.3). Furthermore, these DWMA's should be designed to minimize perimeter relative to area (emphasis added).” (emphasis added)”

“1. Size and number of reserves.

The key to this recovery strategy is timely establishment of at least one DWMA in each recovery unit and prompt implementation of reserve-level protection within them. DWMA's must be located in areas with good desert tortoise habitat currently supporting a minimum of several hundred adult animals at a density of no fewer than 10 per square mile (See Section II.A). More than one DWMA within each recovery unit will increase the probability that a population within a recovery unit will recover.”

“(a) Reserves that are well-distributed across a species’ native range will be more successful in preventing extinction than reserves confined to small portions of a species’ range. Preservation of one or more viable populations within each of the recovery units will ensure that the full range of variation within the species is maintained, enhancing the desert tortoise’s ability to adapt or adjust to future environmental changes.”

“(b) Large blocks of habitat, containing large populations of the target species, are superior to small blocks of habitat containing small populations. While the persistence of all desert tortoise populations is subject to the effects of environmental stochasticity and catastrophes, the persistence of small populations is additionally threatened by demographic and genetic stochasticity (see Section II.A. and Appendix C). This means that the largest possible blocks of good desert tortoise habitat in an area, containing the most dense desert tortoise populations, should be included within DWMA boundaries.”

“(c) Blocks of habitat that are close together are better than blocks far apart. This arrangement facilitates dispersal of desert tortoises among habitat patches. Connecting habitat segments should be of medium to high quality and be wide enough to accommodate several desert tortoise home-range widths (several miles).”

“(d) Habitat that occurs in less fragmented, contiguous blocks is preferable to habitat that is fragmented. The desert tortoise does best in undisturbed environments where the presence of edge species, such as ravens, is minimized. Highly fragmented habitat is mostly edge (because small patches maximize the ratio of edge to interior area) and should be avoided to the extent possible within DWMA's.”

“(e) Habitat patches that minimize edge to area ratios are superior to those that do not. This means that round or square patches of habitat are more likely to retain desert tortoise populations than elliptical or rectangular ones. Long, linear strips are the least desirable.”

“(f) Interconnected blocks of habitat are better than isolated blocks, and linkages function better when the habitat within them is represented by protected, preferred habitat for the target species. Interpopulation dispersal, as mentioned above, is important for population persistence.”
“Maintaining linkages among habitat patches within DWMA's and among the DWMA's themselves is considered here to be important. This will require maintaining connecting segments of habitat that are at least marginally acceptable to the desert tortoise.”

“(g) Blocks of habitat that are roadless or otherwise inaccessible to humans are better than blocks containing roads and habitat blocks easily accessible to humans. Because declines in desert tortoise populations are associated with high densities of access routes, vehicular traffic, and human access (Appendix D, Schoenwald-Cox and Buechner 1992), the access must be limited in the DWMAs. Populations within DWMAs that are inaccessible to motorized recreation or similar activities will have a much better chance of recovery than those in DWMAs where human access is prevalent.”

Delineation of DWMA boundaries should be guided by the above concepts and will be integral to development of recovery unit management plans.

“1.d. Develop reserve-level management within DWMAs.

Because the factors causing the decline of the desert tortoise are primarily human-related (see Section LB.), many human activities within DWMAs will need to be strictly regulated or eliminated.” “Section II.E. describes recommended recovery actions in DWMAs which should become part of recovery unit management plans if DWMAs are selected and delineated as described here. Recommended management actions should be tailored to the needs of specific DWMAs and include activities such as eliminating burro, horse, and domestic livestock grazing; limiting vehicular access, including prohibiting new vehicular access and reducing existing access; and prohibiting new surface disturbances, except to improve the quality of wildlife habitat, watershed protection, or improve opportunities for non-motorized recreation; among others (see Section II.E.).”

Evolutionarily significant units of the desert tortoise within the Mojave region.

“Upper Virgin River Recovery Unit

This recovery unit encompasses all desert tortoise habitat in Washington County, Utah, except the Beaver Dam Slope, Utah population. The desert tortoise population in the area of St. George, Utah, is at the extreme northeastern edge of the species’ range and experiences long, cold winters (about 100 freezing days) and mild summers, during which the tortoises are continually active. Here the animals live in a complex topography consisting of canyons, mesas, sand dunes, and sandstone outcrops where the vegetation is a transitional mixture of Sagebrush Scrub, Creosote Bush Scrub, Blackbush Scrub, and a psammophytic (sandy-soil) community. Desert tortoises use sandstone and lava caves instead of burrows, travel to sand dunes for egg laying, and use still other habitats for foraging. Two or more desert tortoises often use the same burrow.”

In contrast, below is a description of the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit.

“Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit

This recovery unit is found primarily in Nevada, extending into California along the Ivanpah Valley and into extreme southwestern Utah and northwestern Arizona. Desert tortoises here are generally found in Creosote Bush Scrub communities of flats, valley bottoms, alluvial fans, and bajadas, but they occasionally use other habitats such as rocky slopes and Blackbush Scrub.”

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MAY 2020 IMPLEMENTATION AGREEMENT

• Page 2 - 2. Recitals

Text: “C. The Service issues incidental take permits under Section 10(a)(1)(B) of the ESA authorizing take of endangered or threatened wildlife that is incidental to otherwise lawful and non-federal activities (i.e., an incidental take Original ITP or “ITP”), after opportunity for public comment, if it finds that certain statutory criteria are met by the applicant. To obtain an ITP, an applicant submits to the Service an application that includes, among other things, a Habitat Conservation Plan (“HCP”).”

Comment: We suggest adding the following italicized language to clarify the requirements. “To obtain an ITP, *according to the regulatory requirements (50 CFR 17.22(b)(1)*, an applicant submits to the Service...”

• Page 5 - 6. Assurances and Commitments to Perform and Comply with the Amended HCP

Text: B. Cooperative Effort: “In order that the requirements set forth in this IA are fulfilled, each Party hereby acknowledges and accepts its role and responsibilities described in the Amended HCP and this IA, and will perform the actions described in, and otherwise comply with, the Amended HCP.”

Comment: We are unclear how the Terms and Conditions of the ITP that would be issued to Washington County as the Permit Holder, would be performed or otherwise complied with by other entities through the certificate of inclusion process. Would implementation of all ITP Terms and Conditions be the responsibility of the permit holder? If not, under what legal mechanism would these ITP Terms and Conditions be distributed among certificate holders with obligations for implementing the HCP and enforced?

• Page 6 - 7. Severability Remedies, Enforcement, and Effects of Default

Text: B. Effect of a Certificate Holder Default: “Additionally, the Service agrees that a breach by a Certificate Holder of its obligations will not be considered a breach by any other Certificate Holder. In the event a Certificate Holder has materially breached its obligations and, after reasonable notice and opportunity to cure, such Certificate Holder fails to cure, remedy, rectify, or adequately mitigate the effects of such breach, then the County or the Service may terminate the Certificate Holder’s assurances under the New ITP.”

Comment: This section of the IA needs to be removed. This HCP is a cooperative effort. All parts must function correctly to obtain the desired benefit. As written, the major certificate holder can default and the other holders would not be affected; they could continue with development. While this may seem sensible, but from a biological application it does not. By including this wording, there is no incentive for a certificate holder to fully comply or comply in a timely manner with the HCP and Terms and Conditions of the ITP. If this section is removed, there is much incentive to fully comply and in a timely manner. When this section is removed, if one holder defaults, it affects all certificate holders. This provides incentive to all certificate holders to comply with their obligations. We strongly urge that this section of the IA be removed to provide incentive to the certificate holders and parties with interlocal agreements to fully comply with the HCP and Terms and Conditions and comply in a timely manner.

- **Page 6 - C. Effect of Federal Default**

Text: “Failure to comply with or perform the applicable commitment and requirements of this IA or the Amended HCP on the part of a Federal Party shall not result in the suspension or revocation of the New ITP as to any other Parties or any Certificate Holder that is in compliance with the requirements of this IA. Likewise, such a failure will not negatively affect the renewal, amendment, or any other type of extension sought by the applicant.”

Comment: While we agree in theory that a non-federal entity should not be penalized for the failure of a federal entity to perform the applicable commitment and requirements of this IA or the Amended HCP, this section should be removed to provide incentive for the federal entity to comply. This is the only leverage for the federal entity to comply with the ITP/HCP.

- **Page 6 - D. Loss of Original ITP Benefits**

Text: “The County shall have the right to revoke, terminate, or suspend a Municipal Partner’s or Certificate Holder’s right to enjoy or have the benefit, rights and privileges under the Original ITP if the Municipal Partner or Certificate Holder does not comply with the terms and conditions of its Interlocal Agreement or Certificate of Inclusion, as applicable. The County shall promptly notify the Service in writing of any action which would provide the basis for such revocation, termination, or suspension.”

Comment: We do not understand why language is included in this new IA when the Original ITP is being superseded by an amended ITP to be issued presumably in future. Please see language in Section 8. Miscellaneous Provisions, A. Nullification of Agreement – “In the event that the New ITP is...”

Page 6 - D. The term “Municipal Partner” is used in this section but it is not defined in Section 4. Terms Used. Please define this term.

- **Page 7 - 8. Miscellaneous Provisions**

Comment: A. Nullification of Agreement – The term “New ITP” is used in this section, but it is not defined in section 4. Terms Used. Please define this term.

Page 7 - C. Notices

The draft IA says “Utah School and Institutional Lands Trust Administration.” Please correct this to read “Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration.”

- **Page 8, E. Availability of Funds:**

Comment: This section allows the federal and state partners to avoid implementation of their responsibilities identified in the HCP and IA by invoking the Anti-deficiency Act for federal partners and Utah Code§ 63G-6a-1204 for State partners. “Federal and state agency support of the conservation measures in the HCP is contingent on having sufficient funding over the term of the HCP.”

Congress has a history of not fully funding Department of the Interior agencies (e.g., BLM, USFWS) for a few decades, and some DOI agencies have exercised “latitude” in deciding which agency projects to fully fund, partially fund, or not fund when passing out funds from congressional appropriations. Consequently, this “escape clause” in the IA is likely to be used frequently by BLM and USFWS. With respect to the HCP, this inadequate funding means the actions that the HCP commits BLM and the USFWS to implement would have a low probability of being implemented because of funding limitations. We argue this situation is likely to happen with State agencies in Utah during the 25-year permit term. Because the HCP relies heavily on BLM and the State of Utah to fund/implement most of the land acquisition in the Reserve and management of these lands for the tortoise (please see Table 1 of the 2020 HCP), there is uncertainty that the HCP would minimize and mitigate to the maximum extent practicable without sufficient funding to ensure that Reserve lands are acquired and managed as recommended in the 1994 Recovery Plan and supported in the 2011 Revised Recovery Plan. This uncertainty would likely continue during the requested 25-year permit term. Consequently, we believe the HCP should provide funding assurances that when BLM and State agencies are unable to fulfill their obligations under the HCP because of funding limitations, funding from the Applicants should make up for this shortfall.

**Attachment D to the Desert Tortoise Council's September 2020 Comments on the
Habitat Conservation Plan for Washington County, Utah
Final Draft Restated and Amended May 2020**

Status of the Mojave Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*)

The Desert Tortoise Council (Council) has serious concerns about direct, indirect, and cumulative sources of human mortality for the Mojave desert tortoise given the status and trend of the species range-wide, within each of the five recovery units, within the Tortoise Conservation Areas (TCAs) that comprise each recovery unit.

Densities of Adult Mojave Desert Tortoises: A few years after listing the Mojave desert tortoise under the Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published a Recovery Plan for the Mojave desert tortoise (USFWS 1994a). It contained a detailed population viability analysis. In this analysis, the minimum viable density of a Mojave desert tortoise population is 10 adult tortoises per mile² (3.9 adult tortoises per km²). This assumed a male-female ratio of 1:1 (USFWS 1994a, page C25) and certain areas of habitat with most of these areas geographically linked by adjacent borders or corridors of suitable tortoise habitat. Populations of Mojave desert tortoises with densities below this amount are in danger of extinction (USFWS 1994a, page 32). The revised recovery plan (USFWS 2011) designated five recovery units for the Mojave desert tortoise that are intended to conserve genetic, behavioral, and morphological diversity necessary for the recovery of the entire listed species (Allison and McLuckie 2018).

Range-wide, densities of adult Mojave desert tortoises declined more than 32% between 2004 and 2014 (Table 1) (USFWS 2015). At the recovery unit level, between 2004 and 2014, densities of adult desert tortoise declined, on average, in every recovery unit except the Northeastern Mojave (Table 1). Adult densities in the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit increased 3.1% per year (SE = 4.3%), while the other four recovery units declined at different annual rates: Colorado Desert (4.5%, SE = 2.8%), Upper Virgin River (3.2%, SE = 2.0%), Eastern Mojave (11.2%, SE = 5.0%), and Western Mojave (7.1%, SE = 3.3%)(Allison and McLuckie 2018). However, the small area and low starting density of the tortoises in the Northeastern Mojave Recovery Unit (lowest density of all Recovery Units) resulted in a small overall increase in the number of adult tortoises by 2014 (Allison and McLuckie 2018). In contrast, the much larger areas of the Eastern Mojave, Western Mojave, and Colorado Desert recovery units, plus the higher estimated initial densities in these areas, explained much of the estimated total loss of adult tortoises since 2004 (Allison and McLuckie 2018).

At the population level, represented by tortoises in the TCAs, densities of 10 of 17 monitored populations of the Mojave desert tortoise declined from 26% to 64% and 11 have a density that is less than 3.9 adult tortoises per km² (USFWS 2015). The Chuckwalla population is near the proposed Project and has a population below the minimum viable density, and an 11-year declining trend (-37.4%)(USFWS 2015). We are concerned that the proposed Project would bring additional indirect and cumulative impacts to this population and its density and trend would further decline.

Population Data on Mojave Desert Tortoise: The Mojave desert tortoise was listed as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA) in 1990. The listing was warranted because of ongoing population declines throughout the range of the tortoise from multiple human-caused activities. Since the listing, the status of the species has changed. Population numbers (abundance) and densities continue to decline substantially in most of the recovery units and populations (please see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of 10-year trend data for 5 Recovery Units and 17 Critical Habitat Units (CHU)/Tortoise Conservation Areas (TCA) for Agassiz's desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii* (=Mojave desert tortoise). The table includes the area of each Recovery Unit and Critical Habitat Unit (CHU)/Tortoise Conservation Area (TCA), percent of total habitat for each Recovery Unit and Critical Habitat Unit/Tortoise Conservation Areas, density (number of breeding adults/km² and standard errors = SE), and the percent change in population density between 2004-2014. Populations below the viable level of 3.9 breeding individuals/km² (10 breeding individuals per mi²) (assumes a 1:1 sex ratio) and showing a decline from 2004 to 2014 are in red (USFWS 2015).

Recovery Unit Designated Critical Habitat Unit/Tortoise Conservation Area	Surveyed area (km ²)	% of total habitat area in Recovery Unit & CHU/TCA	2014 density/km ² (SE)	% 10-year change (2004–2014)
Western Mojave, CA	6,294	24.51	2.8 (1.0)	–50.7 decline
Fremont-Kramer	2,347	9.14	2.6 (1.0)	–50.6 decline
Ord-Rodman	852	3.32	3.6 (1.4)	–56.5 decline
Superior-Cronese	3,094	12.05	2.4 (0.9)	–61.5 decline
Colorado Desert, CA	11,663	45.42	4.0 (1.4)	–36.25 decline
Chocolate Mtn AGR, CA	713	2.78	7.2 (2.8)	–29.77 decline
Chuckwalla, CA	2,818	10.97	3.3 (1.3)	–37.43 decline
Chemehuevi, CA	3,763	14.65	2.8 (1.1)	–64.70 decline
Fenner, CA	1,782	6.94	4.8 (1.9)	–52.86 decline
Joshua Tree, CA	1,152	4.49	3.7 (1.5)	+178.62 increase
Pinto Mtn, CA	508	1.98	2.4 (1.0)	–60.30 decline
Piute Valley, NV	927	3.61	5.3 (2.1)	+162.36 increase
Northeastern Mojave	4,160	16.2	4.5 (1.9)	+325.62 increase
Beaver Dam Slope, NV, UT, AZ	750	2.92	6.2 (2.4)	+370.33 increase
Coyote Spring, NV	960	3.74	4.0 (1.6)	+ 265.06 increase
Gold Butte, NV & AZ	1,607	6.26	2.7 (1.0)	+ 384.37 increase
Mormon Mesa, NV	844	3.29	6.4 (2.5)	+ 217.80 increase
Eastern Mojave, NV & CA	3,446	13.42	1.9 (0.7)	–67.26 decline
El Dorado Valley, NV	999	3.89	1.5 (0.6)	–61.14 decline
Ivanpah, CA	2,447	9.53	2.3 (0.9)	–56.05 decline
Upper Virgin River	115	0.45	15.3 (6.0)	–26.57 decline
Red Cliffs Desert	115	0.45	15.3 (6.0)	–26.57 decline
Total amount of land	25,678	100.00		–32.18 decline

Density of Juvenile Mojave Desert Tortoises: Survey results indicate that the proportion of juvenile desert tortoises has been decreasing in all five recovery units since 2007 (Allison and McLuckie 2018). The probability of encountering a juvenile tortoise was consistently lowest in the Western Mojave Recovery Unit. Allison and McLuckie (2018) provided reasons for the decline in juvenile desert tortoises in all recovery units. These included decreased food availability for adult female tortoises resulting in reduced clutch size, decreased food availability resulting in increased mortality of juvenile tortoises, prey switching by coyotes from mammals to tortoises, and increased abundance of common ravens that typically prey on smaller desert tortoises.

Declining adult densities through 2014 have left the Western Mojave adult numbers at 49% (a 51% decline) and in the Eastern Mojave at 33% (a 67% decline) of their 2004 levels (Allison and McLuckie 2018, USFWS 2015). Such steep declines in the density of adults are only sustainable if there were suitably large improvements in reproduction and juvenile growth and survival. However, the proportion of juveniles has not increased anywhere in the range of the Mojave desert tortoise since 2007, and in the Western and Eastern Mojave recovery units the proportion of juveniles in 2014 declined to 91% (a 9 % decline) and 77% (a 23% decline) of their representation in 2004, respectively (Allison and McLuckie 2018).

Abundance of Mojave Desert Tortoises: Allison and McLuckie (2018) noted that because the area available to tortoises (i.e., tortoise habitat and linkage areas between habitats) is decreasing, trends in tortoise density no longer capture the magnitude of decreases in abundance. Hence, they reported on the change in abundance or numbers of the Mojave desert tortoises in each recovery unit (Table 2). They noted that these estimates in abundance are likely higher than actual numbers of tortoises and the changes in abundance (i.e., decrease in numbers) are likely lower than actual numbers because of their habitat calculation method. They used area estimates that removed only impervious surfaces created by development as cities in the desert expanded. They did not consider degradation and loss of habitat from other sources, such as the recent expansion of military operations (753.4 km² so far on Fort Irwin and the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center), intense or large scale fires (e.g., 576.2 km² of critical habitat that burned in 2005), development of utility-scale solar facilities (so far 194 km² have been permitted) (USFWS 2016), or other sources of degradation or loss of habitat (e.g., recreation, mining, grazing, infrastructure, etc.). Thus, the declines in abundance of Mojave desert tortoise are likely greater than those reported in Table 2.

Habitat Availability: Data on population density or abundance does not indicate population viability. The area of protected habitat or reserves for the subject species is a crucial part of the viability analysis along with data on density, abundance, and other population parameters. In the Desert Tortoise (Mojave Population) Recovery Plan (USFWS 1994a), the analysis of population viability included population density and size of reserves (i.e., areas managed for the desert tortoise) and population numbers (abundance) and size of reserves. The USFWS Recovery Plan reported that as population densities for the Mojave desert tortoise decline, reserve sizes must increase, and as population numbers (abundance) for the Mojave desert tortoise decline, reserve sizes must increase (USFWS 1994a). In 1994, reserve design (USFWS 1994a) and designation of critical habitat (USFWS 1994b) were based on the population viability analysis from numbers

Table 2. Estimated change in abundance of adult Mojave desert tortoises in each recovery unit between 2004 and 2014 (Allison and McLuckie 2018). Decreases in abundance are in red.

Recovery Unit	Modeled Habitat (km ²)	2004 Abundance	2014 Abundance	Change in Abundance	Percent Change in Abundance
Western Mojave	23,139	131,540	64,871	-66,668	-51%
Colorado Desert	18,024	103,675	66,097	-37,578	-36%
Northeastern Mojave	10,664	12,610	46,701	34,091	270%
Eastern Mojave	16,061	75,342	24,664	-50,679	-67%
Upper Virgin River	613	13,226	10,010	-3,216	-24%
Total	68,501	336,393	212,343	-124,050	-37%

(abundance) and densities of populations of the Mojave desert tortoise in the early 1990s. Inherent in this analysis is that the lands be managed with reserve level protection (USFWS 1994a, page 36) or ecosystem protection as described in section 2(b) of the FESA, and that sources of mortality be reduced so recruitment exceeds mortality (that is, $\lambda > 1$) (USFWS 1994a, page C46).

Habitat loss would also disrupt the prevailing population structure of this widely distributed species with geographically limited dispersal (isolation by distance; Murphy et al. 2007; Hagerty and Tracy 2010). Allison and McLuckie (2018) anticipate an additional impact of this habitat loss/degradation is decreasing resilience of local tortoise populations by reducing demographic connections to neighboring populations (Fahrig 2007). Military and commercial operations and infrastructure projects that reduce tortoise habitat in the desert are anticipated to continue (Allison and McLuckie 2018) as are other sources of habitat loss/degradation.

Allison and McLuckie (2018) reported that the life history of the Mojave desert tortoise puts it at greater risk from even slightly elevated adult mortality (Congdon et al. 1993; Doak et al. 1994), and recovery from population declines will require more than enhancing adult survivorship (Spencer et al. 2017). The negative population trends in most of the TCAs for the Mojave desert tortoise indicate that this species is on the path to extinction under current conditions (Allison and McLuckie 2018). They state that their results are a call to action to remove ongoing threats to tortoises from TCAs, and possibly to contemplate the role of human activities outside TCAs and their impact on tortoise populations inside them.

Densities, numbers, and habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise declined between 2004 and 2014. As reported in the population viability analysis, to improve the status of the Mojave desert tortoise, reserves (area of protected habitat) must be established and managed. When densities of tortoises decline, the area of protected habitat must increase. When the abundance of tortoises declines, the area of protected habitat must increase. We note that the Desert Tortoise (Mojave Population) Recovery Plan was released in 1994 and its report on population viability and reserve design was reiterated in the 2011 Revised Recovery Plan as needing to be updated with current population data (USFWS 2011, p. 83). With lower population densities and abundance, a revised population viability analysis would show the need for greater areas of habitat to receive

reserve level of management for the Mojave desert tortoise. In addition, we note that none of the recovery actions that are fundamental tenets of conservation biology has been implemented throughout most or all of the range of the Mojave desert tortoise.

Definition of an Endangered Species: In 2011, Murphy et al. stated that the “recognition of *G. morafkai* reduces the range of *G. agassizii* to occupying about 30% of its former range.” Given this reduction in species distribution and numbers and the “...drastic population declines in *G. agassizii* during the past few decades, it might be endangered.”

In 2018, Agassiz’s desert tortoise was added to the list of the world’s most endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles. It is in the top 50 species. The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Species Survival Commission, Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, now considers Agassiz’s desert tortoise to be Critically Endangered (Turtle Conservation Coalition 2018).

The IUCN places a taxon in the Critically Endangered category when the best available evidence indicates that it meets one or more of the criteria for Critically Endangered. These criteria are 1) population decline - a substantial (>80 percent) reduction in population size in the last 10 years; 2) geographic decline - a substantial reduction in extent of occurrence, area of occupancy, area/extent, or quality of habitat, and severe fragmentation of occurrences; 3) small population size with continued declines; 4) very small population size; and 5) analysis showing the probability of extinction in the wild is at least 50 percent within 10 years or three generations.

In the FESA, Congress defined an “endangered species” as “any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range...” Given the information on the status of the Mojave desert tortoise and the federal definition of an endangered species, the Council believes the status of the Mojave desert tortoise is that of an endangered species.

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Attachment E.

The following resource is provided as a PDF attachment, and therefore not physically included in this document.

Abella S.R. and K.H. Berry. 2016. Enhancing and restoring habitat for the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management 7(1):xx-xx; e1944-687X. doi: 10.3996/052015-JFWM-046.