



**DESERT TORTOISE PRESERVE
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DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

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October 30, 2024

Mr. Andrew Bowman, President and CEO
Defenders of Wildlife
1130 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

Re: Gratitude for our partnership with Defenders of Wildlife

Dear Mr. Bowman:

The Boards of Directors of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee (DTPC) and the Desert Tortoise Council (DTC) are excited to congratulate you on your new position leading Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders)! Our organizations have enjoyed a decades-long working relationship with Defenders and we deeply appreciate Defenders' substantial commitment of resources to desert tortoise conservation.

In addition to introducing ourselves to you, we would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank several Defenders staff members whose efforts were instrumental in the recent "uplisting" of the Mojave desert tortoise from threatened to endangered by the California Fish and Game Commission. First, a little background on this important milestone:

The Mojave desert tortoise is among the top 50 species on the list of the world's most endangered tortoises and freshwater turtles. The International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Species Survival Commission, Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, now considers the Mojave desert tortoise to be Critically Endangered (Berry et al. 2021), "... based on population reduction (decreasing density), habitat loss of over 80% over three generations (90 years), including past reductions and predicted future declines, as well as the effects of disease (upper respiratory tract disease/mycoplasmosis). *Gopherus agassizii* (sensu stricto) comprises tortoises in the most well-studied 30% of the larger range; this portion of the original range has seen the most human impacts and is where the largest past population losses have been documented. A recent rigorous rangewide population reassessment of *G. agassizii* (sensu stricto) has demonstrated continued adult population and density declines of about 90% over three generations (two in the past and one ongoing) in four of the five *G. agassizii* recovery units and inadequate recruitment with decreasing percentages of juveniles in all five recovery units."

This status, in part, prompted our organizations to join Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders of Wildlife et al. 2020) to petition the California Fish and Game Commission in March 2020 to elevate the listing of the Mojave desert tortoise from threatened to endangered in California. In its status review, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) (2024) stated: "At its public meeting on October 14, 2020, the Commission considered the petition, and based in part on the Department's [CDFW] petition evaluation and recommendation, found sufficient information exists to indicate the petitioned action may be warranted and accepted the petition for consideration. The Commission's decision initiated this status review to inform the Commission's decision on whether the change in status is warranted."

Importantly, in their April 2024 meeting, the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) voted unanimously to uplist the tortoise from threatened to endangered under the California Endangered Species Act based on the scientific data provided on the species' status, declining trend, numerous threats, and lack of effective recovery implementation and land management. Among other things, this determination means that the Mojave desert tortoise population in California is deemed by the Commission to be closer to extinction than when it was listed as threatened in 1989. The only status more dire than "endangered" is "extinct," and the state of California has formally determined based on its status review (CDFW 2024) that the desert tortoise is closer to extinction than it was in 1989.

While we were honored to be co-petitioners with Defenders during the 4-year uplisting process, we need to acknowledge that most of the "heavy lifting" was done by Defenders on behalf of our team. Three individuals especially deserve recognition:

- ***Pamela Flick, California Program Director***, did a phenomenal job coordinating input from the scientific community, navigating the Commission's administrative procedures, keeping our team apprised of progress (and periodic needs for input) during the 4-year review, and coordinating our team's testimony at the April 2024 hearing. The Commission's unanimous vote at that hearing was in part a testament to Pam's tremendous leadership throughout the process.
- ***Jeff Aardahl, Senior California Representative***, spearheaded preparation of the petition and served as Defenders' subject matter expert throughout the process, drawing on his previous career as a wildlife biologist (much of it focused on California deserts) for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Through his current work with Defenders and his former work for BLM, he has been an unfailing advocate for the desert tortoise (and a trusted colleague of our organizations) for more than 45 years.

- **Jacqueline Covey, Communications Specialist**, did excellent work preparing media releases and drumming up public interest in the Commission’s uplisting decision, which resulted in timely stories in the [LA Times](#), [KTLA](#) and [Public News Service](#).

About Our Organizations

DTPC is a non-profit organization formed in 1974 to promote the welfare of the desert tortoise in its native wild state. DTPC members share a deep concern for the continued preservation of the tortoise and its habitat in the southwestern deserts and are dedicated to the recovery and conservation of the desert tortoise and other rare and endangered species inhabiting the Mojave and western Sonoran deserts. The DTPC has a long track record of protecting desert tortoises and their habitat through land acquisition, preserve management, mitigation land banking, and educational outreach. Our founders (two of whom have been continuously active as Board members for over 50 years) were instrumental in identifying the need for and promoting the establishment of the Desert Tortoise Research Natural Area (DTNRA) – a 39.5-square mile fenced preserve in Kern County, California, designated as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern in 1980. Since then, we have served as active stewards of the DTNRA through a cooperative management agreement with the BLM. We have also worked diligently over the past five decades (again, in partnership with the BLM) on land acquisition efforts to enlarge the protected area at the DTNRA. In fact, our partnership with Defenders extends back to at least the 1980’s when Defenders’ state representative Richard Spotts (now retired) was a crucial ally in advocating for the appropriation of Land and Water Conservation Funds for acquisition of private inholdings of land within the DTRNA.

DTC 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 DTC routinely provides information and other forms of assistance to individuals, organizations, and regulatory agencies on matters potentially affecting desert tortoises within their geographic ranges.

Upcoming Opportunities to Connect

If your travels bring you west in 2025, the DTPC would be thrilled to give you a tour of the DTRNA and other important conservation areas in the desert (springtime is best for tortoise viewing). Also, the DTC will be hosting its 50th Annual Meeting & Symposium in Las Vegas February 25-28, 2025. A field trip is scheduled the day before the meeting on February 24. The Symposium will include keynote, invited, and featured speakers and contributed papers and posters. The program will be exciting, challenging, and full of new information. It’s also an excellent opportunity to network with the leading scientists (from both government and academia), policymakers, resource managers and grassroots organizations involved in desert conservation.

With the highest respect for your work,



Roger Dale, President
Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, Inc.



Edward L. LaRue, Jr., M.S.
Ecosystems Advisory Committee, Chairperson
Desert Tortoise Council

Copy: Shawn Cantrell
Pamela Flick
Jeff Aardahl
Jacqueline Covey

Literature Cited

Berry, K.H., L.J. Allison, A.M. McLuckie, M. Vaughn, and R.W. Murphy. 2021. *Gopherus agassizii*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2021: e.T97246272A3150871.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2021-2.RLTS.T97246272A3150871.en>.

[CDFW] California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2024. Status Review for Mojave Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). Report to the Fish and Game Commission, February 2024. 228 pp. with appendices.
<https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=219830&inline>

Defenders of Wildlife, Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, and Desert Tortoise Council. 2020. A Petition to the State of California Fish And Game Commission to move the Mojave desert tortoise from listed as threatened to endangered.
https://defenders.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Desert%20Tortoise%20Petition%203_20_2020%20Final_0.pdf.