



DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

4654 East Avenue S #257B

Palmdale, California 93552

www.deserttortoise.org

eac@deserttortoise.org

Via email only

27 October 2022

Attn: Jon Braginton, Planner
County of San Bernardino
Land Use Services Department - Planning Division
385 North Arrowhead Avenue, First Floor
San Bernardino, CA 92415-0187
Jon.Braginton@lus.sbcounty.gov

RE: Scoping Comments for the proposed Desert Breeze Solar Project

Dear Mr. Braginton,

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.

As of June 2022, our mailing address has changed to:

Desert Tortoise Council
3807 Sierra Highway #6-4514
Acton, CA 93510

Our email address has not changed. Both addresses are provided above in our letterhead for your use when providing future correspondence to us.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide comments on the above-referenced project. Given the location of the proposed project in habitats potentially occupied by Mojave desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*) (synonymous with Agassiz's desert tortoise), our comments pertain to

enhancing protection of this species during activities funded, authorized, or carried out by the San Bernardino County Land Use Services Department - Planning Division (County), which we assume will be added to the Decision Record for this project as needed. Please accept, carefully review, and include in the relevant project file the Council's following comments and attachments for the proposed project.

Project Description

The following project description is provided by the County's Notice of Preparation (NOP), dated September 30, 2022:

The Desert Breeze Solar Project (Project) includes development of a utility scale solar photovoltaic (PV) electricity generation and energy storage facility that would produce up to 130 megawatts (MW) of solar power and include up to 2 gigawatt hours (GWh) of energy storage capacity in a battery energy storage system (BESS) on an approximately 923-acre Project Site comprised of an 813-acre solar array development area and a 110-acre Shared Facilities Area (SFA). The Project will be processed under two separate Conditional Use Permits (CUPs), described below. The Project is bordered on the south by the approved Lockhart Solar PV II Project (Lockhart II; PROJ-2021-00029), approved by the County Board of Supervisors on June 28, 2022, and the Lockhart Solar PV Facility (Lockhart I; PROJ-2019-00125), approved by the County Board of Supervisors on January 7, 2020. The Lockhart I project area is comprised of the former Solar Energy Generating System (SEGS) VIII Solar Thermal Plant site [now decommissioned] and the existing SEGS IX Solar Thermal Plant. The remainder of the Project Site is bordered by vacant land.

The proposed project is located in the Western Recovery Unit for the Mojave desert tortoise and is surrounded by the Superior-Cronese Critical Habitat Unit.

Scoping Comments

Even though the project would be developed on private lands, we feel it is prudent that the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) discusses how this proposed project fits within the management structure of the current land management plan for the surrounding public lands [e.g., California Desert Conservation Area Plan (CDCA Plan) (BLM 1980 as amended), Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (BLM 2015, 2016)]. It should provide maps of critical habitat for the Mojave desert tortoise (USFWS 1994a), Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), and other areas identified for special management by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) [e.g., National Conservation Lands (NCLs)]; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) (e.g., linkage habitats between desert tortoise populations); and other federal, state, and local agencies; and tribal lands.

Proposed Action and Alternatives Considered

We fully expect that the County will comply with all applicable statutes, regulations, codes, and other requirements as they pertain to this project. The County should demonstrate in the DEIR that the proposed project meets all these requirements with respect to the tortoise, that:

- The proposed project will be consistent with priority conservation, restoration, and/or adaptation objectives in the best available landscape-scale information (e.g., for tortoise population connectivity, etc.);

- the applicant has coordinated with governments and agencies, including consideration of consistency with officially adopted plans and policies (e.g., recovery plans);
- the proposed project is in an area with low or comparatively low resource conflicts and where conflicts can be resolved;
- the proposed project will be located in, or adjacent to, previously contaminated or disturbed lands;
- the proposed project will minimize adverse impacts on important fish and wildlife habitats and migration/movement corridors including the desert tortoise habitats and corridors;
- the proposed project will minimize impacts on lands with wilderness characteristics and the values associated with these lands;
- the proposed project will not adversely affect lands donated or acquired for conservation purposes, or mitigation lands identified in previously approved projects such as translocation areas for desert tortoise;
- significant cumulative impacts on resources of concern should not occur as a result of the proposed project (i.e., exceedance of an established threshold such as population viability for the tortoise and connectivity of tortoise populations among recovery units); and,
- County's analysis would use current data on the tortoise for the project area, population, Western Mojave Recovery Unit, and range wide, as population numbers and densities have substantially declined in most recovery units and the data/knowledge currently available on what is needed for habitat linkages for the tortoise.

The County should ensure that the project results in:

- Mitigation to improve conditions within the connectivity areas, and if these options do not exist, mitigation may be applied toward the nearest tortoise conservation area [e.g., an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) for which tortoise had been identified in the Relevant and Important Criteria or critical habitat]; and
- a plan included in the DEIR that would effectively monitor all desert tortoise impacts, including verification that desert tortoise connectivity corridors are functional. The Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA) and California Endangered Species Act (CESA) incidental take permits should further define this monitoring plan.

Regarding the first concern, we believe that a multiagency approach is best to ensure the County is meeting its obligations, soliciting review and input from pertinent federal and state resource agencies, Tribal governments/agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Mitigation of impacts should include, in priority order, avoidance, minimization and compensation for unavoidable impacts. Mitigation should at a minimum offset all direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts, especially given the status and trend of the tortoise (please see *Affected Environment - Status of the Populations of the Mojave Desert Tortoise* below). The County should ensure it is effectively implementing its section 10(a)(1)(B) conservation mandate under the FESA and section 2081 requirements to fully mitigate under California Fish and Game Code.

Mitigation should be applied only in areas where the lands are effectively managed for the benefit of the tortoise for both the short-term and long-term. As currently managed, BLM ACECs in the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) are not meeting this criterion. Consequently,

mitigation should be implemented on lands with a durable conservation designation, or on privately owned lands with a conservation easement or other legal instrument that ensures conservation in perpetuity. Please see *Mitigation Plans* below for additional concerns and requested requirements.

Regarding the second concern, a monitoring plan should (1) be scientifically and statistically credible; (2) be implementable and fully funded; and (3) require the project proponent to implement adaptive management to correct land management practices if the mitigation is not accomplishing its intended purposes.

The Council requests that the County describe the purpose and need for this project and develop and analyze other viable alternatives, such as rooftop solar, which we believe constitute “other reasonable courses of actions” (40 CFR 1508.25). The Council supports alternatives to reduce the need for additional solar energy projects in relatively undisturbed habitats in the Mojave Desert. For example, the City of Los Angeles has implemented a rooftop solar Feed-in Tariff (FiT) program, the largest of its kind in America. The FiT program enables the owners of large buildings to install solar panels on their roofs, and sell the power they generate back to utilities for distribution into the power grid.

We request that County include an urban solar alternative. Under this alternative, owners of large buildings or parking areas would grant the project proponent permission to install solar panels on their roofs and cover parking areas, and sell the power they generate back to utilities for distribution into the power grid.

This approach puts the generation of electricity where the demand is greatest, in populated areas. It may also reduce transmission costs, greenhouse gas emissions from constructing energy projects far from the sources of power demand and materials for construction, the number of affected resources in the desert that must be analyzed under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and mitigation costs for direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts; monitoring and adaptive management costs; and habitat restoration costs following decommissioning. The DEIR should include an analysis of where the energy generated by this project would be sent and the needs for energy in those targeted areas that may be satisfied by urban solar. We request that at least one viable alternative be analyzed in the DEIR where electricity generation via solar energy is located much closer to the areas where the energy will be used, including generation in urban/suburban areas.

In addition, the County should include another viable alternative of locating solar projects on bladed or highly degraded tracts of land (e.g., abandoned agricultural fields). Such an alternative would not result in the destruction of desert habitats and mitigation for the lost functions and values of these habitats. These losses and mitigation are costly from an economic, environmental, and social perspective.

The latter two alternatives are important to consider to minimize or avoid the loss of vegetation that sequesters carbon. Studies around the world have shown that desert ecosystems can act as important carbon sinks. For example, the California deserts account for nearly 10 percent of the state’s carbon sequestration; below ground in soil and root systems, and above ground in biomass.

Protecting this biome can contribute to securing carbon stores in the state (MDLT 2021). Given the current climate change conditions, there is an increasing need for carbon sequestration. Because vascular plants are a primary user of carbon and the proposed Project would result in the loss/degradation of more than 900 acres of plants and their ability to sequester carbon for decades or longer unless successful measures are implemented to restore the same biomass of native vegetation as it is being destroyed, it is imperative that proposed project not result in the loss of vegetation.

The DEIR should consider the monitoring results of recently developed solar projects where soils have been bladed versus those facilities where the vegetation has been mowed or crushed and allowed to revegetate the area. In the latter case, it may be appropriate to allow tortoises to enter the facilities and re-establish residency (i.e., repatriate) under the solar panels as vegetation recolonizes the area. This could be an *option* for the currently described project alternative. It should be designed/implemented as a scientific experiment to add to the limited data on this approach to determine the extent of effects on Mojave desert tortoise populations and movements/connectivity between populations, which is an important issue for this species, particularly over the long-term (see *Desert Tortoise Habitat Linkages/Connectivity among Populations and Recovery Units* below). Long-term monitoring for the life of the project would need to be included to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy.

Affected Environment

Status of the Population of the Mojave Desert Tortoise: The Council provides the following information for the proponent so that these or similar data may be included in the DEIR. The Council believes that BLM’s failure to implement effective recovery actions for the Mojave desert tortoise as given in the recovery plan (both USFWS 1994b and 2011) has contributed to tortoise declines between 2004 to 2014 (Table 1; USFWS 2015). There are 17 populations of Mojave desert tortoise described below that occur in Critical Habitat Units (CHUs) and Tortoise Conservation Areas (TCAs); 14 are on lands managed by the BLM; 8 of these are in the CDCA.

Table 1. Summary of 10-year trend data for 5 Recovery Units and 17 CHUs/TCAs for Mojave desert tortoise. The table includes the area of each Recovery Unit and CHU/TCA, percent of total habitat for each Recovery Unit and CHU/TCA, density (number of breeding adults/km² and standard errors = SE), and the percent change in population density between 2004 and 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.

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 Valley, 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
Range-wide Area of CHUs - TCAs/Range-wide Change in Population Status	25,678	100.00		-32.18 decline

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%

Important points from these tables include the following:

Change in Status for the Mojave Desert Tortoise Range-wide

- Ten of 17 populations of the Mojave desert tortoise declined from 2004 to 2014.
- Eleven of 17 populations of the Mojave desert tortoise are no longer viable. These 11 populations represent 89.7 percent of the range-wide habitat in CHUs/TCAs.

Change in Status for the Western Mojave Recovery Unit – Nevada and California

- This recovery unit had a 51 percent decline in tortoise density from 2004 to 2014.
- Tortoises in this recovery unit have densities that are below viability.

Change in Status for the Superior-Cronese Tortoise Population in the Western Mojave Recovery Unit.

- The population in this recovery unit experienced declines in densities of 61 percent from 2004 to 2014. In addition, there was a 51 percent decline in tortoise abundance.
- This population has densities less than needed for population viability (USFWS 1994b).

Change in Status for the Mojave Desert Tortoise in California

- Eight of 10 populations of the Mojave desert tortoise in California declined from 29 to 64 percent from 2004 to 2014 with implementation of tortoise conservation measures in the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert (NECO), Northern and Eastern Mojave Desert (NEMO), and Western Mojave Desert (WEMO) Plans.

- Eight of 10 populations of the Mojave desert tortoise in California are no longer viable. These eight populations represent 87.45 percent of the habitat in California that is in CHU/TCAs.

- The two viable populations of the Mojave desert tortoise in California are declining. If their rates of decline from 2004 to 2014 continue, these two populations will no longer be viable in about 2020 and 2031.

Change in Status for the Mojave Desert Tortoise on BLM Land in California

- Eight of eight populations of Mojave desert tortoise on lands managed by the BLM in California declined from 2004 to 2014.

- Seven of eight populations of Mojave desert tortoise on lands managed by the BLM in California are no longer viable.

Change in Status for Mojave Desert Tortoise Populations in California that Are Moving toward Meeting Recovery Criteria

- The only population of Mojave desert tortoise in California that is not declining is on land managed by the National Park Service, which has increased 178 percent in 10 years.

The Endangered Mojave Desert Tortoise: The Council believes that the Mojave desert tortoise meets the definition of an endangered species. 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...” In the California Endangered Species Act (CESA), the California legislature defined an “endangered species” as a native species or subspecies of a bird, mammal, fish, amphibian, reptile, or plant, which is in serious danger of becoming extinct throughout all, or a significant portion, of its range due to one or more causes (California Fish and Game Code § 2062). Because most of the populations of the Mojave desert tortoise were non-viable in 2014, most are declining, and the threats to the Mojave desert tortoise are numerous and have not been substantially reduced throughout the species’ range, the Council believes the Mojave desert tortoise should be designated as an endangered species by the USFWS and California Fish and Game Commission.

Mojave desert tortoise is now on 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 Mojave desert tortoise to be Critically Endangered (Berry *et al.* 2021), which is a “species that possess an extremely high risk of extinction as a result of rapid population declines of 80 to more than 90 percent over the previous 10 years (or three generations), a current population size of fewer than 50 individuals, or other factors.” It is one of three turtle and tortoise species in the United States to be critically endangered.

Table 3. Summary of data for Agassiz’s desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii* (=Mojave desert tortoise) from 2004 to 2021 for the 5 Recovery Units and 17 Critical Habitat Units (CHUs)/Tortoise Conservation Areas (TCAs). The table includes the area of each Recovery Unit and CHU/TCA, percent of total habitat for each Recovery Unit and CHU/TCA, density (number of breeding adults/km² and standard errors = SE), and percent change in population density between 2004-2014 (USFWS 2015). Populations below the viable level of 3.9 breeding individuals/km² (10 breeding individuals per mi²) (assumes a 1:1 sex ratio) (USFWS 1994a, 2015) or showing a decline from 2004 to 2014 are in **red**.

Recovery Unit: Designated CHU/TCA &	% of total habitat area in Recovery Unit & CHU/TCA	2004 density/ km ²	2014 density/ km ² (SE)	% 10- year change (2004– 2014)	2015 density/ km ²	2016 density/ km ²	2017 density/ km ²	2018 density/ km ²	2019 density/ km ²	2020 density/ km ²	2021 density/ km ²
Western Mojave, CA	24.51		2.8 (1.0)	-50.7 decline							
Fremont-Kramer	9.14		2.6 (1.0)	-50.6 decline	4.5	No data	4.1	No data	2.7	1.7	No data
Ord-Rodman	3.32		3.6 (1.4)	-56.5 decline	No data	No data	3.9	2.5/3.4*	2.1/2.5*	No data	1.9/2.5*
Superior-Cronese	12.05		2.4 (0.9)	-61.5 decline	2.6	3.6	1.7	No data	1.9	No data	No data
Colorado Desert, CA	45.42		4.0 (1.4)	-36.25 decline							
Chocolate Mtn AGR, CA	2.78		7.2 (2.8)	-29.77 decline	10.3	8.5	9.4	7.6	7.0	7.1	3.9
Chuckwalla, CA	10.97		3.3 (1.3)	-37.43 decline	No data	No data	4.3	No data	1.8	4.6	2.6
Chemehuevi, CA	14.65		2.8 (1.1)	-64.70 decline	No data	1.7	No data	2.9	No data	4.0	No data
Fenner, CA	6.94		4.8 (1.9)	-52.86 decline	No data	5.5	No data	6.0	2.8	No data	5.3
Joshua Tree, CA	4.49		3.7 (1.5)	+178.62 increase	No data	2.6	3.6	No data	3.1	3.9	No data
Pinto Mtn, CA	1.98		2.4 (1.0)	-60.30 decline	No data	2.1	2.3	No data	1.7	2.9	No data
Piute Valley, NV	3.61		5.3 (2.1)	+162.36 increase	No data	4.0	5.9	No data	No data	No data	3.9

Northeastern Mojave AZ, NV, & UT	16.2		4.5 (1.9)	+325.62 increase							
Beaver Dam Slope, NV, UT, & AZ	2.92		6.2 (2.4)	+370.33 increase	No data	5.6	1.3	5.1	2.0	No data	No data
Coyote Spring, NV	3.74		4.0 (1.6)	+ 265.06 increase	No data	4.2	No data	No data	3.2	No data	No data
Gold Butte, NV & AZ	6.26		2.7 (1.0)	+ 384.37 increase	No data	No data	1.9	2.3	No data	No data	2.4
Mormon Mesa, NV	3.29		6.4 (2.5)	+ 217.80 increase	No data	2.1	No data	3.6	No data	5.2	5.2
Eastern Mojave, NV & CA	13.42		1.9 (0.7)	-67.26 decline							
El Dorado Valley, NV	3.89		1.5 (0.6)	-61.14 decline	No data	2.7	5.6	No data	2.3	No data	No data
Ivanpah Valley, CA	9.53		2.3 (0.9)	-56.05 decline	1.9	No data	No data	3.7	2.6	No data	1.8
Upper Virgin River, UT & AZ	0.45		15.3 (6.0)	-26.57 decline							
Red Cliffs Desert**	0.45	29.1 (21.4-39.6)**	15.3 (6.0)	-26.57 decline	15.0	No data	19.1	No data	17.2	No data	
Rangewide Area of CHUs - TCAs/Rangewide Change in Population Status	100.00			-32.18 decline							

*This density includes the adult tortoises translocated from the expansion of the MCAGCC, that is resident adult tortoises and translocated adult tortoises.

**Methodology for collecting density data initiated in 1999.

Standardized Surveys – Desert Tortoise and Other Species

For the DEIR to fully analyze the effects and identify potentially significant impacts, the following surveys should be performed to determine the extent of rare plant and animal populations occurring within areas to be directly and indirectly impacted.

Prior to conducting surveys, a knowledgeable biologist should perform a records search of the California Natural Diversity Data Base (CNDDDB; CDFW 2022) for rare plant and animal species reported from the region. The results of the CNDDDB review would be reported in the DEIR with an indication of suitable and occupied habitats for all rare species reported from the region based on performing the species-specific surveys described below.

California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG 2010) lists hundreds of plant communities occurring in California, including those that are considered Communities of Highest Inventory Priority, or “CHIPs.” Biologists completing surveys on behalf of the project proponent should document such communities where they occur and indicate how impacts to them will be minimized.

The project proponent should fund focused surveys for all rare plant and animal species reported from the vicinity of the proposed project. Results of the surveys will determine appropriate permits from CDFW and USFWS and associated avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures. Focused plant and animal surveys should be conducted by knowledgeable biologists for respective taxa (e.g., rare plant surveys should be performed by botanists), and to assess the likelihood of occurrence for each rare species or resource (e.g., plant community) that has been reported from the immediate region. Focused plant surveys should occur only if there has been sufficient winter rainfall to promote germination of annual plants in the spring. Alternatively, the environmental documents may assess the likelihood of occurrence with a commitment by the proponents to perform subsequent focused plant surveys prior to ground disturbance, assuming conditions are favorable for germination.

Specialized Reptile Surveys: If there are any loose, shifting sands within/near the impact areas of the panels, along the gen-tie lines, or access routes, focused surveys for Mojave fringe-toed lizards (*Uma scoparia*) should be performed (University of California, Riverside 2005, 2007).

Migratory Birds/Eagles: The County should ensure that all actions it authorizes are implemented in compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and associated regulations, executive orders, and policies (e.g., Driscoll 2010, Pagel et al. 2010) to avoid mortality or injury to migratory birds and harassment of eagles.

Mohave Ground Squirrel: The Mohave ground squirrel (*Xerospermophilus mohavensis*) is a threatened species under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). Because the Proposed Project occurs within the range of the Mohave ground squirrel, the project proponent should conduct focal Mohave ground squirrel surveys [CDFG 2003 (revised 2010)] to determine presence/absence. In the absence of these focal MGS surveys, the proponent must assume presence and mitigate accordingly [CDFG 2003 (revised 2010)].

Burrowing owl: Surveys for western burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) should be performed implementing available methods (CDFG 2012). In addition to the project footprint, the protocol requires that peripheral transects be surveyed at 30-, 60-, 90-, 120-, and 150-meter intervals in all suitable habitats adjacent to the subject property to determine the potential indirect impacts of the project on this species. If burrowing owl sign is found, CDFG (2012) describes appropriate minimization and mitigation measures that would be required. If burrowing owl sign is found, the project proponent should develop a science-based mitigation/monitoring/adaptive management plan with the USFWS and CDFW and ensure that this plan is implemented.

Mojave Desert Tortoise Surveys: Formal protocol surveys for Mojave desert tortoise (USFWS 2019) must be conducted at the proper times of year. Because USFWS (2009) and CDFW require only experienced biologists to perform protocol surveys, USFWS and CDFW biologists should review surveyors' credentials prior to initiating the surveys. Per this protocol, since the impact area is larger than 500 acres, the surveys must be performed in the time periods of April-May or September-October so that a statistical estimate of tortoise densities can be determined for the "action area" (please see below). If any tortoise sign is found, the project proponent should coordinate with USFWS and CDFW to determine whether "take" under FESA or CESA is likely to occur from implementation of the proposed project. If tortoises are present, the project proponent must obtain a Section 10(a)(1)(B) incidental take permit from the USFWS and a Section 2081 incidental take permit from the CDFW prior to conducting any ground disturbance.

To determine the full extent of impacts to tortoises and to facilitate compliance with the FESA and CESA, authorized biologist(s) must consult with the USFWS to determine the action area for this project. The USFWS defines "action area" the Code of Federal Regulations and their Desert Tortoise Field Manual (USFWS 2009) as "all areas to be affected directly or indirectly by proposed development and not merely the immediate area involved in the action (50 CFR §402.02)."

Mojave Desert Tortoise Impacts Analysis:

Analysis of Direct and Indirect Impacts: The alternatives analysis should include an economic analysis that provides the total cost of constructing the proposed project versus other alternatives, so the public can see how much the total cost of each alternative is. This would include an analysis of the costs of replacing all public resources that would be lost from granting the proposed project including direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts. Please note, this analysis would include habitat replacement or restoration costs including the time needed to achieve full replacement, not just acquisition, management, monitoring, and adaptive management costs.

The DEIR should include a thorough analysis of the status and trend of the tortoise in the action area, tortoise conservation area(s), recovery unit(s), and rangewide. Tied to this analysis should be a discussion of all likely sources of mortality for the tortoise and degradation and loss of habitat from implementation of solar development including construction, operation and maintenance, decommissioning, and restoration. The DEIR should use the data from focused plant and wildlife surveys in their analysis of the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the proposed project on the Mojave desert tortoise and its habitat, other listed species, and species of concern/special status species.

We expect that the DEIR will document how many acres would be impacted directly by solar arrays, access roads to the site, administration/maintenance buildings, parking areas, transmission towers, switchyards, laydown areas, internal access roads, access roads along gen-tie lines, a perimeter road, perimeter fencing, substations, battery storage (e.g., the project footprint). We also request that separate calculations document how many acres of desert tortoise habitats would be temporarily and permanently impacted both directly and indirectly (e.g., “road effect zone,” etc.) by the proposed Project. As given below, these acreages should be based on field surveys for tortoises not just available models.

Desert Tortoise Habitat Linkages/Connectivity among Populations and Recovery Units: The DEIR should analyze how this proposed project will impact the movement of tortoises relative to linkage habitats/corridors. The DEIR should include an analysis of the minimum linkage design necessary for conservation and recovery of the desert tortoise (e.g., USFWS 2011, Averill-Murray et al. 2013, Hromada et al. 2020), and how the project, along with other existing projects, would impact the linkages between tortoise populations and all recovery units that are needed for survival and recovery. We strongly request that the environmental consequences section of the DEIR include a thorough analysis of this indirect effect (40 Code of Federal Regulations 1502.16) and appropriate mitigation to maintain the function of population connectivity for the Mojave desert tortoise and other wildlife species be identified. Similarly, please document how this project may impact proximate conservation areas, such as BLM-designated ACECs that surround the area.

Jurisdictional Waters in California: A jurisdictional waters analysis should be performed for all potential impacts to washes, streams, and drainages. This analysis should be reviewed by the CDFW as part of the permitting process and a section 1600 Streambed Alteration Agreement acquired, if deemed necessary by CDFW.

Mitigation Plans

The DEIR should include effective mitigation for all direct, indirect, and cumulative effects to the tortoise and its habitats. The mitigation should use the best available science with a commitment to implement the mitigation commensurate to impacts to the tortoise and its habitats. Mitigation should include a fully-developed desert tortoise translocation plan, including protection of tortoise translocation area(s) from future development and human disturbance in perpetuity; raven management plan; non-native plant species management plan; fire prevention plan; and compensation plan for the degradation and loss of tortoise habitat that includes protection of the acquired, improved, and restored habitat in perpetuity for the tortoise from future development and human use.

All plans should be provided in the DEIR so the public and the decisionmaker can determine their adequacy (i.e., whether they are scientifically rigorous and would be effective in mitigating for the displacement and loss of tortoises and degradation and loss of tortoise habitat from project implementation). Too often, such plans are alluded to in the draft environmental document and promised later, which does not allow the reviewers to assess their adequacy, which is unacceptable. If not available as appendices in draft documents, all indicated plans must be published in the final environmental documents. Their inclusion is necessary to determine their adequacy for mitigating direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts, and monitoring for effectiveness and adaptive management regarding the desert tortoise. If these plans are not provided, it is not possible for the County, other decisionmakers, and the interested public to determine the environmental consequences of the project to the tortoise.

These mitigation plans should include an implementation schedule that is tied to key actions of the construction, operation, maintenance, decommissioning, and restoration phases of the project so that mitigation occurs concurrently with or in advance of the impacts. The plans should specify success criteria, include an effectiveness monitoring plan to collect data to determine whether success criteria have been met, and identify/implement actions that would be required if the mitigation measures do not meet the success criteria.

Translocation Plan - Translocated Tortoises & Translocation Sites: How many tortoises will be displaced by the proposed project? How long will translocated tortoises be monitored? Will the monitoring report show how many of those tortoises lived and died after translocation and over time? Are there any degraded habitats or barren areas that may impair success of the translocation? Are there incompatible human uses in the new translocation area that need to be eliminated or managed to protect newly-translocated tortoises? Were those translocation areas sufficiently isolated that displaced tortoises were protected by existing or enhanced land management? How will the proponent minimize predation of translocated tortoises and avoid adverse climatic conditions, such as low winter rainfall conditions that may exacerbate translocation success? Were tortoises translocated to a site where they would be protected from threats (e.g., off-highway vehicles, future development, etc.)? These questions should be answered in the Environmental Consequences section of the DEIR.

The project proponent should implement the USFWS' Translocation Guidance (USFWS 2020) and coordinate translocation with CDFW. In addition, the proponent's project-specific translocation plan should be based on current data and developed using lessons learned from earlier translocation efforts (e.g., increased predation, drought). (see *Desert Tortoise Translocation Bibliography Of Peer-Reviewed Publications*¹ in the footnote).

The Translocation Plan should include implementation of a science-based monitoring plan approved by the USFWS and CDFW that will accurately assess these and other issues to minimize losses of translocated tortoises and impacts to their habitat. For example, the health of tortoises may be jeopardized if they are translocated during drought conditions, which is known to undermine translocation successes (Esque et al. 2010). If drought conditions are present at the time of project development, we request that the proponent confer with the USFWS and CDFW immediately prior to translocating tortoises and seek input on ways to avoid loss of tortoises due to stressors associated with drought. One viable alternative if such adverse conditions exist is to postpone site development until which time conditions are favorable to enhance translocation success.

Moving tortoises from harm's way, the focus of the Translocation Guidance, does not guarantee their survival and persistence at the translocation site, especially if it will be subject to increased human use or development. In addition to the Translocation Guidance and because translocation sites are mitigation for the displacement of tortoises and loss of habitat, these sites should be managed for the benefit of the tortoise in perpetuity. Consequently, a conservation easement or other durable legal designation should be placed on the translocation sites. The project proponent should fully fund management of the site to enhance it for the benefit of the tortoise in perpetuity.

¹ https://www.fws.gov/nevada/desert_tortoise/documents/reports/2017/peer-reviewed_translocation_bibliography.pdf

Tortoise Predators and a Predator Management Plan: Common ravens are known predators of the Mojave desert tortoise and their numbers have increased substantially because of human subsidies of food, water, and sites for nesting, roosting, and perching to hunt (Boarman 2003). Coyotes and badgers are also predators of tortoises. Because ravens can fly at least 30 miles in search of food and water daily (Boarman et al. 2006) and coyotes can travel an average of 7.5 miles or more daily (Servin et al. 2003), this analysis should extend out at least 30 miles from the proposed project site.

The DEIR should analyze if this new use would result in an increase in common ravens and other predators of the desert tortoise in the action area. During construction, operations and maintenance, decommissioning, and restoration phases of the proposed project, the County should require science-based management of common raven, coyote, and badger predation on tortoises in the action area. This would include the translocation sites.

For local impacts, the Predator Management Plan should include reducing/eliminating human subsidies of food and water, and for the common raven, sites for nesting, roosting, and perching to address local impacts (footprint of the proposed project). This includes buildings, fences, and other vertical structures associated with the project site. In addition, the Predator Management Plan should include provisions that eliminate the pooling of water on the ground or on roofs. The Predator Management Plan should include science-based monitoring and adaptive management throughout all phases of the project to collect data on the effectiveness of the Plan's implementation and implement changes to reduce/eliminate predation on the tortoise if existing measures are not effective.

For regional and cumulative impacts, the County should require the project proponent to participate in efforts to address regional and cumulative impacts. For example, in California, the project proponent should be required to contribute to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Raven Management Fund to help mitigation for regional and cumulative impacts. Unfortunately, this Fund that was established in 2010 has not revised its per acre payment fees to reflect increased labor and supply costs during the past decade to provide for effective implementation. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation should revise the per acre fee.

We request that for any of the transmission options, the project use infrastructure (particularly towers) that prevent raven nesting and perching for hunting. For example, for gen-ties/transmission lines the tubular design pole with a steep-pointed apex and insulators on down-sloping cross arms is preferable to lattice towers, which should not be used. New fencing should not provide resources for ravens, like new perching and nesting sites.

According to Appendix A of Common Raven Predation on the Desert Tortoise (USFWS 2010), "The BLM's biological assessments and the USFWS' biological opinions for the CDCA plan amendments reiterate the need to address the common raven and its potential impacts on desert tortoise populations." Please ensure that all standard measures to mitigate the local, regional, and cumulative impacts of raven predation on the tortoise are included in this DEIR, including developing a raven management plan for this specific project. USFWS (2010) provides a template for a project-specific management plan for common ravens. This template includes sections on construction, operation, maintenance, and decommissioning (including restoration) with monitoring and adaptive management during each project phase (USFWS 2010).

Fire Prevention/Management Plans: The proposed project could include numerous infrastructure components that have been known to cause fires. Lithium-ion batteries at the project site have the potential to explode and cause fires and are not compatible with using water for fighting fires. Photovoltaic panel malfunctions have caused vegetation to burn onsite. We request that the DEIR include a Fire Prevention Plan in addition to a Fire Management Plan specifically targeting methods to deal with explosions/fires produced by these batteries/panels as well as other sources of fuel and explosives on the project site.

Habitat Compensation Plan: When the project proponent seeks an incidental take permit from the CDFW, because their project would result in take of a listed species under CESA (e.g., Mojave desert tortoise, Mohave ground squirrel, etc.), compensatory mitigation would be required. The mitigation lands must be occupied by the species and secured and managed in perpetuity for the listed species. Hence, the DEIR should include a Habitat Compensation Plan for the loss/degradation of habitat. This plan should calculate how it will fully mitigate for the impacts of the proposed project including direct, indirect, cumulative, and temporal impacts.

Climate Change and Non-native Plants

Climate Change: We request that the DEIR address the effects of the proposed action on climate change warming and the effects that climate change may have on the proposed action. For the latter, we recommend including: an analysis of habitats within the project area that may provide refugia for tortoise populations; an analysis of how the proposed action would contribute to the spread and proliferation of nonnative invasive plant species; how this spread/proliferation would affect the desert tortoise and its habitats (including the frequency and size of human-caused fires); and how the proposed action may affect the likelihood of human-caused fires. We strongly urge that the County require the project proponent to develop and implement a management and monitoring plan using this analysis and other relevant data that would reduce the transport to and spread of nonnative seeds and other plant propagules within the project area and eliminate/reduce the likelihood of human-caused fires. The plan should integrate vegetation management with fire prevention and fire response.

Impacts from Proliferation of Nonnative Plant Species and Management Plan: The DEIR should include an analysis of how the proposed project would contribute to the spread and proliferation of non-native invasive plant species; how this spread/proliferation would affect the desert tortoise and its habitats (including the frequency and size of human-caused fires); and how the proposed project may affect the frequency, intensity, and size of human-caused and naturally occurring fires. For reasons given in the previous paragraph, we strongly urge that the County require the project proponent to develop and implement a management and monitoring plan for nonnative plant species. The plan should integrate management/enhancement of native vegetation with fire prevention and fire response to wildfires.

Hydrology and Water Quality

Regarding water quality of surface and ground water, the DEIR should include an analysis of the impacts of water acquisition, use, and discharge for panel washing, potable uses, and any other uses associated with this proposed project, and cumulative impacts from water use and discharge

on native perennial shrubs and annual vegetation used for forage by the Mojave desert tortoise, including downstream and downstream impacts. The DEIR should analyze how much water is proposed to be used during construction and operation; how any grading, placement, and/or use of any project facilities will impact downstream/downslope flows that are reduced, altered, eliminated, or enhanced. This analysis should include impacts to native and non-native vegetation and habitats for wildlife species including the Mojave desert tortoise, for which washes are of particular importance for feeding, shelter, and movements.

Therefore, we request that the DEIR include an analysis of how water use during construction, operations and maintenance, decommissioning, and habitat restoration will impact the levels of ground water in the region. These levels may then impact surface and near-surface flows at springs, seeps, wetlands, pools, and groundwater-dependent vegetation in the basin. The analyses of water quality and quantity of surface and ground water should include appropriate measures to ensure that these impacts are fully mitigated, preferably beginning with avoidance and continuing through to other forms of mitigation.

Cumulative Effects

With regards to cumulative effects, the DEIR should list and analyze all project impacts within the region including future state, federal, and private actions affecting listed species on state, federal, and private lands. We also expect that the environmental documents will provide a detailed analysis of the “heat sink” effects of solar development on adjacent desert areas and particularly Mojave desert tortoise in addition to climate change.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide scoping comments on this project and trust they will help protect tortoises during any resulting authorized activities. Herein, we reiterate that the Desert Tortoise Council wants to be identified as an Affected Interest for this and all other projects funded, authorized, or carried out by the County that may affect species of desert tortoises, and that any subsequent environmental documentation for this project is provided to us at the contact information listed above. Additionally, we ask that you respond in an email that you have received this comment letter so we can be sure our concerns have been registered with the appropriate personnel and office for this project.

Respectfully,



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

cc: California State Clearinghouse state.clearinghouse@opr.ca.gov
Heidi Calvert, Regional Manager, Region 6, Inland and Desert Region, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Heidi.Calvert@wildlife.ca.gov
Brandy Wood, Biologist, Region 6, Inland and Desert Region, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Brandy.Wood@wildlife.ca.gov

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