



DESERT TORTOISE COUNCIL

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Via email only

14 February 2020

James Holden, Rangeland Management Specialist
Bureau of Land Management, Hassayampa Field Office
21605 North 7th Avenue
Phoenix, AZ 85027-2929
jholden@blm.gov

RE: Vulture Complex Grazing Authorization Renewal (DOI -BLM-AZ-P010-2020-0005-EA)

Dear Mr. Holden,

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.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide comments on the above-referenced project. Given the location of the four cattle allotments in habitats occupied by Sonoran desert tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*) (synonymous with "Morafka's desert tortoise"), our comments pertain to enhancing protection of this species during grazing activities authorized by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

After reading the Rangeland Health Evaluation Environmental Assessment (BLM 2020, herein "EA"), our conclusion is that BLM has failed to conduct an adequate assessment of habitat conditions or population status for the Sonoran desert tortoise on these four allotments. Rather, BLM has focused on shrub and perennial grass components of the habitat without any analysis of how grazing on these allotments is affecting annual plant species on which the tortoise, which is designated by the BLM as "Sensitive," relies. It appears that BLM has hand-picked certain rangeland health standards to evaluate and has totally neglected to assess the condition of native and special status species of animals and the effect of livestock grazing on those resources.

We interpret the *Arizona Standards for Rangeland Health and Guidelines for Grazing Administration's* (BLM 1997, herein "Standards and Guidelines") as being intended to protect habitats on which tortoises rely, as follows:

Standard 3: Desired Resource Conditions

Productive and diverse upland and riparian-wetland plant communities of native species exist and are maintained.

Criteria for meeting Standard 3:

Desired plant community objectives will be developed to assure that soil conditions and ecosystem function described in Standards 1 and 2 are met. They detail a site-specific plant community, which when obtained, will assure rangeland health, State water quality standards, **and habitat for endangered, threatened, and sensitive species [emphasis added]**, since the tortoise is designated by the BLM as "Sensitive"]. Thus, desired plant community objectives will be used as an indicator of ecosystem function and rangeland health.

Guidelines:

3-2. Conservation of Federal threatened or endangered, proposed, candidate, and other **special status species is promoted by the maintenance or restoration of their habitats.**

We note on page 12 of the EA that cattle grazing on the four allotments coincides with 49,762 acres of BLM-designated Category II Habitat, which is defined as: 1) Habitat that may be essential to the maintenance of viable populations; 2) Habitat where most conflicts are resolvable; and 3) Habitat that contains medium to high densities of tortoises or low densities contiguous with medium or high densities. There is no indication in the EA that BLM has determined baseline density estimates for tortoises, which is necessary to allow some indication of what constitutes "viable populations." What are the densities of tortoises in these allotments, and are the population trends stable, increasing, or decreasing? In the absence of such data, how can BLM determine that all Standards and Guidelines (particularly Standard 3 and Guideline 3-2) have been "Achieved" as reported in Section 7.1 of the EA?

We note on page 16 of the EA the following statement: "*The recommended palatable shrub and grass compositions will provide for adequate wildlife forage on the site for species such as Sonoran desert tortoise, mule deer, quail, and other non-game wildlife species [italicized emphasis added].*" Given that the Sonoran desert tortoise relies mostly on annual forage that is available for a limited time of the year, we find that assessing rangeland health based, particularly on shrubs, and to a lesser extent on grasses, fails to assess annual species on which tortoises forage. Is the BLM studying the appropriate habitat components, particularly annual plants, to ensure its own Standards and Guidelines are being met?

The Arizona BLM is signatory to the Sonoran Desert Tortoise Candidate Conservation Agreement (UFWs, 2015). One of the protective measures is "Ensure adequate forage remains for SDT [Sonoran desert tortoise] following ephemeral use periods." The agreement has several other measures related to grazing. We request that the BLM specify how this grazing authorization renewal is complying with the Candidate Conservation Agreement.

The EA indicates that "the Vulture Mountain ACEC [Area of Critical Environmental Concern] is

an approximately 6,500-acre area within the Vulture Complex surrounding Vulture and Caballeros Peaks on the Garcia, Jones and Los Caballeros allotments (page 12),” it does not indicate which resources are to be protected within the ACEC (e.g., to protect cultural, biological, or other resources?) We understand that ACECs, regardless of the resources being protected, would be managed more proactively for BLM-Sensitive species, including the tortoise, yet there is no indication that higher-level management is being implemented or if the three criteria for Category II Habitats are being achieved.

We note on page 23 of the EA that the last Rangeland Inventory was completed in 1981. It is not clear in the EA how this 38-year-old inventory factors into assessing current range conditions and health. Perhaps it is the baseline to which current conditions are applied, but we fail to see in the EA the results of such comparisons. We also note that the monitoring protocols given in Section 5.2 of the EA vaguely refer to “a variety of study methods,” none of which seek to ascertain available annual plant forage for tortoises, current tortoise populations, or long-term trends in their numbers. “Pace Frequency, Dry Weight Rank, and Point Cover” all pertain to measurements of perennial plant ground cover without regard to annual plant forage available to tortoises.

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 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.

Regards,



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

Literature Cited

Bureau of Land Management. 1997. Arizona standards for rangeland health and guidelines for grazing administration. Dated April 28, 1997.

Bureau of Land Management. 2020. Environmental Assessment for Rangeland Health Evaluation Vulture Complex: Jones Allotment #03045, Garcia Allotment #03095, Los Caballeros Allotment #03052, and Cactus Garden Allotment #03011. Draft EA produced by the Hassayampa Field Office of the BLM. Phoenix, AZ.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2015. Candidate Conservation Agreement for the Sonoran Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus morafkai*) in Arizona, Phoenix AZ.