**Desert Managers’ Group Meeting Notes 26 Aug 2021**

**(Teleconference)**

The Desert Managers’ Group meeting held a conference call on 26 August 2021 in lieu of an ‘in person’ summer meeting due to travel restrictions from the ongoing Corona Virus Pandemic. The last meeting for the DMG was a telecon conducted 20 August 2020. This meeting was facilitated by DoD REC Office/Navy Region Southwest (NRWSW), Mike Huber and Marine Corps Installations West (MCIWEST) G-7/Marine Corps REC, Mike Hamilton. The agenda for the meeting was kept to a focused minimum with a concentration on continuing communication, sharing information, and working to schedule an ‘in person’ meeting in February or March of 2022. The meeting was well attended and almost all agencies except for Fish and Wildlife, Cal Department of Fish and Wildlife, Cal Transportation, along with the counties were represented.

Two Action items identified for the meeting that are pending.

(1) Continue to update DMG Contact List.

(2) Determine date and Location for the 2022 ‘in Person Meeting’ [February-March].

Though no formal presentations were provided a wealth of information and the opportunity to reconnect with various agencies made the meeting a success. A summary of the Agency Roundtable Discussions and Updates follows and is listed by agency generally per the attachment which served as the agenda.

**Agency Roundtable Discussions and Updates**

**Bureau of Land Management (BLM) California Desert District (CDD)**

District Supervisor, Andrew Archuleta provided an overview for the CDD issues.

(1) BLM is continuing to engage on the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) Durability Agreement.

(2) Desert Tortoise species continue to slow declines and work continues to preserve species and habitats, which includes Raven (predator) control to limit predation by ravens on juvenile tortoises.

(3) CDD has a new Resource Manager, Amy Fenstock [Russel Scofield a long time DMG Member (and once a DMG Co-Chair) has retired].

**Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Ridgecrest Field Office**

Field Office Supervisor Carl Symons provided an overview on their issues.

(1) There are several exploratory mining/drilling activities in the Field District ongoing.

(2) An initial wild Burro roundup in cooperation with NAWS China Lake was just completed, succeeding in capturing 90 animals.

(3) A future wild horse roundup is being planned due to drought conditions for October 2020.

(4) Several grazing allocations has been withdrawn and restoration work is now underway on these areas.

(5) Ridgecrest is continuing to conduct weed management, to include conduction removal in the Desert Tortoise Natural Area (DTNA) conservation area.

**Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Palm Springs Field Office**

Field Office Supervisor Tim Gilloon provided the overview on their issues.

(1) Palm Springs Office has as a priority the review and monitoring of 14 renewable energy projects in various stages of development in their area of responsibility to include reviews and monitoring of ‘right of ways (ROWs)’ for the projects.

(2) Palms Springs Office is currently working on the management plan for the ‘Sand To Snow’ and the ‘Mojave Trails’ National Monuments and is also coordinating with the Forest Service on the ‘White Water’ management plan.

(3) Additionally the Field Office is monitoring several different applications for groundwater pumping projects.

**Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Needles Field Office**

Field Office Supervisor was not available, CDD Director provided an overview of their issues.

(1) Desert Training Center (DTC) [World War II historic training site with General Patton] continues to conduct restoration of desert sites to include recently completing a ‘Protestant Altar’ and interpretation signage for the site.

(2) Ongoing coordination with the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) for actions and operations involving mining and flight operations with the Bonanza Mine as well as a short term water pipeline and possible impacts on Bonanza Spring. Castle Mountain Mine is another action which is being reviewed by the Field Office.

(3) The Field Office is also beginning the development of the ‘Mojave Trails National Monument’ planning efforts.

(4) ‘Route 66’ has recently been designated a ‘National Historic By-Way’ and the Field District is working on commemoration plans.

(5) Burro roundup for removing Burros along the Colorado River riparian area is being planned.

(6) The Needles Field Office in conjunction with their Fire Maintenance Crews have been working on developing new access roads to Amboy Crater as well as interpretation signage.

**Bureau of Land Management (BLM) El Centro Field Office**

Field Office Supervisor was not available, CDD Director provided an overview of their issues.

(1) El Centro Field Office has been designated as the lead Field Office for the ongoing Salton Sea Management area.

(2) El Centro like all of the Desert Field Offices is getting ready for Off Highway Vehicle and other Desert Recreation season as temperatures cool, with large crowds expected at ‘Imperial Dunes Recreation Area’.

(3) The Field Office is also working on both a ‘Green Hydrogen’ and ‘East Mesa Solar’ applications for the district.

**US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)** did not have any representatives available for the call.

**National Park Service**

**Mojave National Preserve**

The Preserve Superintendent, Mike Gauthier, provided an overview of the Preserve updates.

(1) CIMA road maintenance continues.

(2) Preserve is preparing for recreation season.

(3) ‘Mojave Road’ was recently designated as a National Historic route. Plans to manage and provide interpretive actions underway.

**Death Valley National Park**

The Park Superintendent, Mike Reynolds, provided an overview of the Park’s updates.

(1) Death Valley has an estimated population of 3,000 – 4,000 Burros in the Park. They are working with NAWS China Lake, and Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue with an overall goal of having no burros in the Park,

(2) The Park is currently monitoring several renewable energy projects and mining operations on the boundaries of the Park. These include solar projects, a sulfur mine, and at least two gold mines.

(3) Death Valley is also working on restoration of unauthorized OHV driving with replanting, signage and barriers. Additionally OHV damage and the resulting fines for restoration to the illegal driving on the ‘Devil’s Racetrack’ will cost the violator $50,000.

(4) Illegal Marijuana grow sites along the Park perimeter in various riparian areas continue to have direct and indirect impacts on the regional watersheds and groundwater/aquifers.

**Joshua Tree National Park**

The Acting Park Superintendent, Jane Rodgers (Dave Smith, Superintendent out on Detail) provided an overview.

(1) Joshua Tree is using Green Sticker OHV Funds to assist in mitigating and restoring OHV Off trail damage in the Park.

(2) Joshua Tree is also using ‘Dingle Act’ Funds to help with incorporating new lands being added to the Park.

(3) The Park is experiencing more boundary intrusions as housing develops on its perimeters.

(4) Joshua Tree is also experiencing an increase in invasive plants caused again by an increase in housing around the park, this time through birdseed from feeders with the birds eating the seed and then passing it in the park. Additionally the urban development and watering is attracting bighorn sheep and other wildlife to the urban interface as well.

(5) The Park is also working on several management plans that include ‘Climbing and Bouldering Recreation Management’ and their ‘Climate Change Program and Impacts to Recreational Use’.

(6) Joshua Tree is expanding its Western Entrance to include more entry and exit lanes and a new ‘Visitor Center’.

(7) The ‘Twentynine Palms Visitor Center’ is being closed and will be relocated to downtown, to be combined with the City of Twentynine Palms and the local Indigenous Native American Tribes as a joint ‘Visitor Information and Cultural Center’. This is expected to be complete in March 2022.

(8) Joshua Tree is expecting another record year of attendance meeting or exceeding last year’s attendance of 3 Million and they have developed a ‘Preventative Search and Rescue’ Group to educate and inform guests of the dangers in the park.

**San Bernardino National Forest**

Jihadda Govan, Mojave Trails National Monument Coordinator provided an overview of current Forest Service issues. She stated that a new Forest Supervisor had just been hired, Daniel Harrison and that he would be assuming duties shortly.

(1) All of California’s northern Forests have been closed due to high fire danger and though some closures have occurred in Southern California, those areas open are under strict fire restrictions with NO smoking and flame producing items of any type allowed in the Forest.

(2) There is a fire currently burning in the Forest in the Lido Creek District

**Department of Defense**

**Edwards Air Force Base**

Larry Zimmerman provided an update for Edwards AFB.

(1) Illegal marijuana cultivation is happening just outside the base boundary fence. Destruction to desert tortoise habitat and the water table is occurring.  A recent eradication sweep by the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department seized some 373,000 pot plants and more the 16 tons of harvested marijuana with a street value of more than $1 billion.

(2) Edwards is continuing to move forward with the development of 3,000 Acres of Solar installation on the Base.

(3) The Base is coordinating the location and siting of several Electrical Transmission lines that are planned to transit the Installation.

(4) Cooperating with other DoD installations located in the Mojave Desert on a PEA to deal with Ravens predating on juvenile Desert Tortoises.

(5) Edwards has found Western Pond Turtles in the wetlands at the Piute Ponds Complex.  More research and surveys are underway.

(6) Tri-Color Blackbird study of a breeding population on base was recently completed.

(7) Inventory surveys of pollinators, bats, large mammals, and reptiles are underway.

(8) Edwards AFB shares a Wildland Fire Support Module with Vandenberg AFB that is used for prescribed fire activities on base.

(9) The Base has just completed 15 miles of Desert Tortoise fencing along a public road that passes through the Installation.

(10) Waterfowl season begins in mid-October on base at the Piute Ponds Complex.  Hunting is open to the public in addition to service members.

(11) A USFWS Federal Wildlife Officer is contracted to provide law enforcement services on base.

**National Training Center, Fort Irwin**

David Davis, Biologist for Irwin kicked off the NTC update, with Staff Archaeologist Brenda Reed, and NEPA Planner, Dave Housman concluding updates.

(1) Artificial burrowing owl burrows installed by NTC in 2019 were occupied by owls who successfully raised young in 2021.

(2) Irwin currently tracking Ravens with GPS tags to monitor and study movements.

(3) NTC to date has also worked to round up ~250 Burro’s on the facility since 2019.

(4) NTC is employing wildlife cameras to track various ground species, including Mohave ground squirrel.

(5) NTC’s Cultural Programmatic Agreement is in staffing review and is at SHPO and concurrently being reviewed by Tribes.

(6) NTC EIS for multi-training exercises and public lands withdrawal is still underway.

(7) Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan (INRMP) update for Ft Irwin is underway (this is required every five years and/or when significant management changes have occurred).

(8) Desert Tortoise monitoring for NTC’s Western Training Area continues.

(9) NTC will install 1-2 wildlife guzzlers in 2021 to benefit bighorn sheep and upland game birds.

(10) NTC will support two SERDP desert tortoise projects in 2021.

**DOD Region IX/Navy Region Southwest**

Director Jason Golumbfskie-Jones and Legis Director, Garret Smythe provided info for Navy Region.

(1) Groundwater extractions in and around NAWS China Lake are currently under litigation per the ‘Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).

(2) Impacts of illegal Marijuana cultivation impacting farming communities in East San Diego County and Imperial County as well.

(3) DoD Region IX/Navy Region IX submitted 30x30 Information survey to the State of California.

**NAWS China Lake**

Julie Hendrix, Natural Resources Specialist.

(1) 2019 earthquake recovery is still primary and will be for at least 3-5 years (over $2 billion in MILCONs).

(2) Focused on our listed species: tortoise, Mohave tui chub, and Inyo California towhee.

(3) Our INRMP major 5 year update is in progress, may be complete in late 2022 (at earliest).

(4) had some large acreage fires on our north range in summer 2020, but no fires yet in 2021. Still assessing habitat/species impact and planning rehabilitation (funding dependent).

(5) Participating in the raven PEA (Navy is lead agency).

(6) NAWSCL south range Cuddeback area (2019 land withdrawl, approximately 33,000 acres) is still unfenced and no signage. Shortage of LE and no CN LE is affecting encroachment/trespass in this former BLM high public use area in tortoise critical habitat (Superior Cronese CHU).

(7) Concur with NAVFAC regional report re: water legal issues potential impact on natural resources, pistachio and alfalfa agriculture on western edge of north range are huge water users, and this agriculture also attracts ravens.

(8) Concur that cannabis (legal and illegal) grow operations are serious concern.

(9) Horse/burro census and gathers ongoing in partnership with BLM. Census in 2020 and burro gather in spring 2021; horse gather planned for fall/winter 2021.

**MCLB Barstow**

Ryan Barela, Natural Resources provided the following information.

(1) Barstow is undertaking Desert Tortoise Health and Population survey.

(2) The Base is also working on the commemoration of ‘Route 66’ project.

(3) Barstow is working on updating its’ historic programs.

**Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) Twentynine Palms**

CPLO Director,Erin Adams briefed updates and issues for MCAGCC.

(1) MCAGCC recently was awarded a successful ‘REPI Challenge’ and are implementing additional Desert Tortoise conservation measures.

(2) Desert Tortoise cooperative agreement was recently completed and actions to further implement RAVEN EA are also underway.

(3) The ‘Shared Use Area’ of Johnson Valley will be closed for military exercise

22 October - 1 November 2021, and again 26 April – 9 May 2022. Public notices have been released for the closures. Next planned closure is October 2022.

(4) MCAGCC is having impacts from illegal Marijuana cultivation similar to the other Federal Agencies and DoD Installations.

**Non Governmental Conservation Agencies**

**Mojave Desert Land Trust (MDLT)**

Cody Hanford, Executive Director for MDLT provided the updates.

(1) MDLT has just celebrated 15 years of operation and have worked to conserve over a 100K acres during this time.

(2) MDLT in collaboration with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has developed a program, ‘Women in Science Discovering Our Mojave (WISDOM)’ as a MDLT internship program that seeks to help engage women from underserved communities studying Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM).  The WISDOM program fosters an environment of mentorship and career exploration by connecting female students with researchers and professionals, helping to develop the next generation of public lands managers and stewards.

<https://www.mdlt.org/wisdom/>

(3) MDLT is pursuing an Environmental Enhancement Grant to assist in additional conservation efforts in the desert.

(4) CA AB-1183 California Desert Conservation Program.(2021-2022) [ASM Ramos].

The bill would establish the California Desert Conservation Program under the administration of the CA Wildlife Conservation Board to: (1) protect, preserve, and restore the natural, cultural, and physical resources of the portions of the Mojave and Colorado Deserts region in California through the acquisition, restoration, and management of lands, (2) promote the protection and restoration of the biological diversity of the region, as specified, (3) provide for resilience in the region to climate change, as provided, (4) protect and improve air quality and water resources within the region, and (5) undertake efforts to enhance public use and enjoyment of lands owned by the public, as provided. The bill would also establish the California Desert Conservation Program Fund Account in the State Treasury. Upon appropriation by the Legislature, the bill would authorize the board to expend moneys deposited in the account for the purposes of this program. [STATUS Read in Senate for third time 30 Aug 2021]. <https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1183>

**NEXT MEETINGS:** Proposing an in person two day meeting tentatively in March of 2022. Location and host are still TBD.

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