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Subj: DESERT MANAGERS’ GROUP MEETING SUMMARY, JOSHUSA TREE

 NATIONAL PARK, 18-19 OCT 2022

Encl: (1) Desert Managers Group Meeting Agenda 18-19 October 2022

1. The Desert Managers Group held its’ Fall semiannual meeting 18-19 October at Joshua Tree National Park, CA. The meeting, the first ‘in person meeting’ to be conducted in two years, was hosted by Joshua Tree (JOTR) National Park with the Park Superintendent in attendance. The California Desert District Director, the Palm Springs-South Coast and Needles Field Office Manager were in attendance for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Palm Springs, Mojave National Preserve, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) were also in attendance. Department of Defense Regional Environmental Coordination Offices for the Air Force, Navy and the Marine Corps, as well as representation from NAWS China Lake, Edwards AFB, NTC Ft Irwin, MCIWEST-MCB Camp Pendleton, MCLB Barstow, and MCAGCC Twentynine Palms were at the meeting. The agenda is attached and the presentations given at the meeting are available upon request. The final meeting summary will be posted on the DMG website at: [Desert Managers Group Home - DENIX (osd.mil)](https://denix.osd.mil/dmg/home/).

2. Park Ranger David Larson provided an initial overview of the Park which included a brief history, statistics, and key points of the approximately 800,000 acre Park which is just a few hours from Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, and Phoenix and because of its’ close proximity to these major metropolitan areas, the Park continues to set record annual attendance levels, now receiving over 3 Million visitors a year. The Park originally established as a National Monument in 1936 by President Roosevelt, became a National Monument in 1994 with the passage of the ‘California Desert Protection Act’. The Park provides a multitude of resources and opportunities for visitors to include camping, hiking, and world class rock climbing as well as providing protected habitat for a multitude of fauna and flora to include big horn sheep, desert tortoise, and the namesake Joshua Trees. Another key feature provided by the Park is that it encompasses the boundary of two desert ecosystems – the Mojave and Colorado deserts. The brief highlighted the new Joshua Tree National Park Visitor Center, now open, located in downtown Twentynine Palms. Ranger Larson also led a superb field tour of the Park later in the afternoon giving a great tour of some of the variety and resources the Park provides.

3. Jane Rodgers, Chief Science and Resource Steward for JOTR provided a brief on the Park’s ongoing efforts to both document and respond to the changing world climate which between 2014-2020 global temperatures recorded were cumulatively the warmest 7 seven years in Earth’s recorded history. Highlights from her brief ‘Joshua Tree National Park Climate Change Response Program’ stated that the Park is continuing to get warmer and drier. For JOTR between 1895 and 2016: Mean annual temperatures have increased by 3o Fahrenheit combined with a mean annual precipitation decrease of 39%, causing 27 of 39 springs to go dry during this period, a 60% reduction in springs available to wildlife and riparian plants. As part of their climate change response JOTR has instituted various actions including Joshua Tree studies that has included detailed range distribution mapping, measuring, and modeling to identify and compare current and future distributions of Joshua Trees. In addition to drought, fire and changing landscapes are adding more fine fuels to the environment coming from nonnative forb covers as well as invasive grasses such as cheatgrass. Drought and increased fires have had a negative effect on the survival and recruitment of Joshua Trees. To mitigate these additional stressors, JOTR with various partners are working to maintain fuel beaks and clear vegetation from around Joshua Trees providing defensible spaces and removing fine fuels and ladder fuels from around the trees. In addition to these efforts JOTR again with great external partners is working to collect and develop seed banks for the trees. The entire biota of JOTR will continue to be impacted by changes in climate that will result in drastic alterations to habitat suitability, the current planning and ongoing efforts will continue.

4. Linda Castro, California Wilderness Coalition (CA Wild) and Chris Clarke, National Park Conservation Association (NPCA) provided their presentation ‘Protect California Deserts’ an overview of two new proposed National Monument actions in the Mojave, the ‘Chuckwalla NM’ and the proposed expansion of ‘Joshua Tree National Park’. ‘Protect California Deserts’ is also the name of a coalition of 16 conservation agencies that are working to conserve and protect additional public lands in California’s Mojave and Colorado Deserts and in the San Bernardino National Forest.  Again, the coalition is working on several efforts and two of these include the proposal to establish a national monument (temporarily named Chuckwalla National Monument) in the Chuckwalla Valley, south of Joshua Tree National Park. The proposed monument would span an area from the Mecca Hills Wilderness in the west to the Palo Verde Mountains in the east. There is also an ongoing effort to expand Joshua Tree National Park into the Eagle Mountain area, pursuant to a 2016 National Park Service study with a proposal to add 17,670 acres of BLM lands to the National Park. These areas will provide habitat for rare and imperiled species, another opportunity to further protect cultural areas, several historic sites including mining and WWII-era training, as well as maintaining recreational access.

5. George Ellis, Range Training and Management (RTAM), MCIWEST gave an overview on the Marine Corps’ ongoing effort to use lands off of DoD Installations that provide ground and aviation maneuver training opportunities for the Marine Corps in the ‘Off-Installation Transit Axis and Corridor Analysis: Training Overview and NEPA Strategy’ brief. These actions are being formalized with the undertaking of a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) action to further formalize and identify off-installation sites/events/activities that are site-specific to current and future training requirements. These will include High-priority Landing Zones (LZs), movement corridors, and littorals identified for transit or short-duration training activities and that will have enduring usage agreements for the areas (e.g., real estate licenses, land-use agreements, Agency authorizations). Continued meetings with stakeholders are planned and the notional timeline for this action has letters requesting potential ‘Cooperating Agencies’ to be released in December 2022. An internal initial Draft ‘Description of Proposed Actions and Alternatives (DOPAA) is forecast to be completed in February 2023, while Natural and Cultural Resource surveys will be coordinated and conducted in 2023. It is anticipated that the initial Public Draft EA will be available for comment in late 2023. A final determination with a possible ‘Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)’ if supported by an EA would then be completed sometime in 2024.

6. Dr. Brian Henen, NREA, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms presented an overview on the ‘Desert Tortoise Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP): a DoD and DOI Initiative’. The RASP Program, established in June 2018 between the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Interior (DOI) is designed to develop species conservation and recovery initiatives and provide increased flexibility for military missions. The stated purpose of the RASP is to "develop and promote effective ecosystem and species conservation and recovery initiatives" and to "provide for increased flexibility for military mission activities”.  DoD and DOI have identified the Mojave Desert tortoise (“desert tortoise”) as a priority species for recovery support through the RASP, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have developed biological opinions (BOs) in consultation with several DoD installations within the range of the desert tortoise to support the RASP initiative. MCAGCC along with other Mojave DoD Installations and in partnership with BLM and FWS are also working to develop and maintain populations of healthy sustaining Desert Tortoise in various suitable habitats within the desert. This is being accomplished by translocation and accompanying research monitoring multiple variables of these relocated tortoises to include overall survivorship, assimilation, compatible grazing, in addition to several other factors. In addition to these actions MCAGCC has also been operating an active Desert Tortoise Headstart program at their ‘Tortoise Research and Captive Rearing Site (TRACRS)’ site, hatching and rearing Desert Tortoises in a controlled and protected environment prior to releasing these animals into the wild. These actions along with those of the partners in the Desert are working to conserve and preserve the legacy of the Desert Tortoise in the Mojave.

7. Tonya Marshall, Salton Sea Program Manager (SSPM), CDFW, provided an overview and update on the ‘Salton Sea Management Plan (SSMP)’. The plan, released in March 2017, is called the Phase 1: 10-Year Plan, aims to improve conditions for residents and wildlife around the Salton Sea by constructing projects that create habitat and reduce dust from the exposed lakebed on 30,000 acres. This plan emerged from actions taken initially by the Salton Sea Task Force formed in 2015 under than Governor Jerry Brown with the California Natural Resources Agency as the lead. The SSMP proposes the construction of 29,800 acres (12,100 ha) of habitat restoration and dust suppression projects on the Salton Sea lakebed areas that have been, or will be, exposed by evaporation by the year 2028. The first major habitat project, the 4,110-acre Species Habitat Conservation (SCH) project is currently under construction with more than 1,200 acres of dust suppression projects completed to date. Work also continues with important vegetation enhancement work on the exposed lakebeds to further suppress dust and nearly 6,000 acres of major project work is underway. The SSMP team recognizes the crucial role of partnerships in meeting of all restoration goals and are working in close collaboration with local governments, including Imperial County, Riverside County, Imperial Irrigation District, Imperial County Air Pollution Control District, and the Salton Sea Authority. Close coordination and cooperation also continues with state and federal agencies, including the Colorado River Basin Regional Water Quality Control Board, State Water Resources Control Board, California Air Resources Board, South Coast Air Quality Management District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The development of a Long-Range Plan, the re-establishment of the Long-Range Planning Committee and the additional establishment of an independent panel of experts to continue to evaluate the efforts will go on for several decades. Additional information is available at [Salton Sea Management Program – Salton Sea Project (ca.gov)](https://saltonsea.ca.gov/program/) website.

8. Bureau of Land Management updates were provided by Shelly Lynch, California Desert District (CDD) Director BLM, that included the following highlights. She was followed by Tim Gilloon, Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office Manager, than Noel Glines-Bovio, Mojave Trails National Monument, and Mike Ahrens, Needles Field Office.

 a. There is a DoD – BLM State Meeting scheduled for 6 December. One proposal at this meeting is the request by the Navy to place all of Eastern California off limits to renewables. CDD recommended that the ‘OITACA’ brief be added to this meeting.

 b. CDD has assumed the coordination of additional highway Desert Tortoise fencing with CALTRANS.

 c. Ivanpah High Voltage transmission line through Bishop is being reviewed by BLM CDD. BLM is the lead for NEPA. [Ivanpah-Control Project | Projects in Progress | Reliability | About Us | Home - SCE](https://www.sce.com/about-us/reliability/upgrading-transmission/Ivanpah-Control).

 d. GEOThermal Renewable Site planning and reviews continuing within CDD Office.

 e. Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office continuing to review a large amount of renewable energy lease applications. These applications include sites within ‘Development Focus Areas (DFAs)’ as well as areas outside of designated DFAs.

 f. Palm Springs is also continuing to review and work on policies to manage Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs – i.e., drones) overflight and usage restrictions.

 g. Mojave Trails National Monument is continuing to work on their management plan.

#  h. Needles Field Office is continuing to coordinate with the Federal Railway Administration on the High-speed rail project along the ‘I-15 corridor right of way’. Route will go from Victor Valley to Las Vegas, are ~135 Miles.

9. Brian Croft, Palm Springs FWS Office provided the following updates for Fish and Wildlife.

 a. A Federal listing under the ESA for the ‘Joshua Tree’ is undergoing another status assessment to determine federal listing eligibility; new determination is expected in January 2023.

 b. The ‘Inyo California Towhee’ was proposed for delisting in 2013 and a final decision is still pending. Drought-related population declines have changed the outlook for the species, but significant management progress has also been made to address threats. FWS will perform a 5-year review in 2023 to determine current status and make a final decision on the 2013 delisting rule in 2024.

 c. A petition to list the ‘Rock Daisy’ under the Federal ESA is under review. 90-day finding regarding whether to move forward with a full status assessment is due in November 2022.

 d. Five year review for the ‘Amargosa Vole’ was completed in July 2022 and recommended no change in status for that species. FWS is currently conducting 5-year reviews for ‘Lane Mountain Milk Vetch’, Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard, and the ‘Coachella Valley Milk Vetch’ are getting underway at FWS Office. Also performing a species status assessment for the Triple-ribbed milk-vetch to determine whether a change in status is warranted.

 e. RASP BO for NTC Ft Irwin under Section 7 of the ESA has been issued. BO provides coverage for training in the Western Training Area and increased training flexibility.

 f. RASP NFWF Request for Proposals for 2023 Conservation Grants will be released in early 2023. 2022 Request for Proposals resulted in award of over $2 million to support restoration activities in tortoise critical habitat. 2022 funds came from Fort Irwin, REPI, BNSF Railway, and other sources.

 g. Review of Renewable Energy projects in the Palms Springs area of responsibility is ongoing. Continuing to work with BLM on section 7 consultations, as needed.

 h. General Conservation Plan (GCP) for the Desert Tortoise is being developed by FWS.NEPA scoping will begin in late 2022 or early 2023. GCP would cover issuance of incidental take permits for desert tortoises for private lands projects throughout the California deserts except on private lands inholdings within critical habitat, ACECs, NCL lands and other sensitive conservation areas.

 i. FWS completed the Habitat Conservation Planning process for the 8,000-acre ‘Bellefield’ Mojave solar project. Utilizes retirement of the Rudnick Grazing Allotment in its mitigation strategy..

 j. 2022 raven monitoring and management program resulted in declines in raven densities in most tortoise conservation in the California deserts.

 k. FWS is working on a ‘Section 10 J Rule’ to allow for establishment of a non-essential experimental populations of this species on the Chuckwalla Bench. Draft should be ready for public review in late 2022 or early 2023.

10. DMG Attendee Roundtable updates.

-Gabe Goodman, Regional Operations and Planning Manager, Environmental

Security, MCIWEST stated that OSD/DoD has recently decided to apply for

voting membership and join virtually all other federal land and emergency

management agencies in the National Wildfire Coordinating Group. DoD is also

in process of finalizing a Wildland Fire Cohesive Strategy, and policy

updates to support fire management programs throughout the Army, Navy, Air

Force, and Marine Corps. Mr. Goodman is standing by to assist with

inter-regional wildland fire support."

-David Smith, Joshua Tree National Park Superintendent relayed from a recent meeting with the Park Service Regional Director that the National Park Service would like to hire more veterans and is interested in figuring out how to implement this action.

-JOTR also reported that as of meeting time Death Valley National Park had only two paved roads open due to damage from heavy rain and flash flooding.

-Jeremy Puntruncio, Mojave National Preserve, reported that the Preserve is continuing to recover as well from recent heavy rains and flash floods and that much of the Preserve paved roads are washed out. REMINDER from Mojave Preserve: DO NOT DRIVE AROUND ROAD BARRIERS.

-Jessica Palmer, NRSW/DoD REC 9, stated that water reliability and energy resiliency remain top priorities for Navy Region Southwest. She spoke to her office's role in identifying, analyzing, and engaging on environmental legislation and regulations in the REC 9 AOR, which covers California's Mojave and Colorado desert areas, and shared some of the 2022 California Bills that had recently been signed into law by Governor Newsom (SB 230 about drinking water, AB 1817 related to PFAS), as well as some of the recent CARB mobile source regulations DoD REC 9 has/is engaging in. Lastly she mentioned the nexus between environment, specifically air regulations,

and energy and the Navy's efforts to more creatively meet mission needs and environmental and energy goals as exemplified by Naval Base San Diego's recent participation in CARB's LCFS program.

-Chad Utz, NTC Fort Irwin, highlighted a prototype ESCTP/SERDP project ‘Solar Water Still’ consisting of 150 panels that uses solar energy to extract water from humidity in the air, even in the desert, and is estimated to produce around 43K gallons of potable drinkable water a year.

-NTC Western Training Area preparing to relocate 500 Desert Tortoises to enable training.

-Another innovation that NTC is working on is using waste energy from a new power plant in conjunction with Solar Farm working to help with heating and to air condition the Base Hospital.

-David Davis, NTC Fort Irwin, updated some additional items.

-These include the Base has documented a decent bloom (relative to two

years of no blooms) for Desert Cymopterus (CYDE) and Lane Mountain

Milk-Vetch (LMMV) but no seeds were produced from this year’s bloom because

of depressed precipitation levels.

-NTC also mentioned that the Installation, especially in Family housing

areas but also around some of the Barracks, are experiencing negative

interactions with Bobcats. Apparently the animals are getting food subsidies

from some soldiers and family members which are desensitizing them and like

other wild animals, they are beginning to associate human habitation with

food sources. An initiative ‘to not feed wildlife or leave out pet food’

with their PAO is underway. This was just before our recent four (4) reports

of bobcats attacking unattended small pets.

-NTC is continuing to actively manage their Wild Burro population and has

been working with the ‘Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue’. This partnership has

been ongoing since 2018 to remove and relocate the animals. ‘Peaceful

Valley’ works to have the burro’s adopted throughout the US. Since 2018 with

our current MOA/MOU we have caught and removed 350+ burros that will soon be

adopted off of NTC.

-NTC is in research & development phase using solar energy and humidity to

capture alternative water source of potentially 43,000 gallons per year.

This will provide a reprieve from a low aquifer.

-NTC is also actively working on acquiring funding for wildlife guzzlers.

We have potential funding for 6 - 8 more guzzlers

-Kristina Brown, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, provided the following updates for the Base with the ‘Shared Use Area’ expansion area that is used exclusively by the Marine Corps for two 30 day periods a year plan and agreement is under review for any required updates.

-Planning for the CY2023 ‘King of the Hammers’ OHV Race and events scheduled

for 2 – 11 Feb 2023 is underway.

-Special Use Airspace over the MCAGCC expansion areas is still in coordination with the FAA.

-Coordination meetings with BLM continue to formalize ‘right of ways’ for trails on and off of the Installation used in ongoing military training.

11. Next meeting is scheduled for 19 -20 April 2023. Location BLM Needles, CA.

12. Copies of the briefs, questions, and/or additional information can be obtained by contacting me at (760)725-2635 or by email at Charles.hamilton@usmc.mil.

 C. M. Hamilton