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From: MCI West G-7 Regional Environmental Coordination Office / Governmental

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Subj: DESERT MANAGERS’ GROUP MEETING SUMMARY, BLM FIELD

 OFFICE, NEEDLES, CA, 19-20 APR 2023

Encl: (1) Desert Managers Group Meeting Agenda 19-20 April 2023

1. The Desert Managers Group held its’ Spring semiannual meeting at the BLM Field Office in Needles, CA, 19 - 20 April 2023, with the Needles Field Manager hosting the event. The California Desert District Director, Barstow and Ridgecrest Field Office Managers were in attendance for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Palm Springs and National Park Service Representatives from Mojave/Lake Meade as well as the CESU/Pacific Northwest Offices were also in attendance. Department of Defense Regional Environmental Coordination Offices for the Navy and the Marine Corps, as well as representation from NAWS China Lake, 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 were sent out by separate email but are also 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. BLM Field Manager Mike Ahrens provided an overview of the Needles Field Office area of responsibility along with highlights and facts for the Mojave Trails National Monument (MTNM). The Needles Field Office oversees approximately 3.3 Million acres of land which includes 1.2 Million acres designated as Wilderness Areas, the most in BLM. The Office also oversees multiple other uses to include Renewable Energy project siting, several large mining operations, grazing allotments, as well as many dispersed recreational opportunities in their area. Needles Field Office contains over half of the East Mojave Heritage Trail and over 3,200 miles of Off Highway Vehicle Trails. The area also encompasses many cultural as well as historic resource areas to include much of Patton’s War World II Desert Training Areas, Amboy Crater, as well as other unique natural and cultural resource sites. Remarkably the Field Office has pockets of old growth conifers in the Kingston Mountains. The Needles Field Office shares its’ western and northern boundaries with MCAGCC Twentynine Palms and eastern boundaries with the States of Arizona and Nevada as well as parts of the Colorado River.

The Mojave Trails National Monument, designated in 2016, spans 1.6 million acres of federal lands, including more than 350,000 acres of previously Congressionally-designated wilderness. It is the 3rd largest monument managed by the Bureau of Land Management and is located between Barstow and Needles, California, and connects the Mojave National Preserve with Joshua Tree National Park. The monument primarily falls within the boundaries of the Needles Field Office but it also stretches into the BLM Barstow and Palm Springs Office Areas as well. The Mojave Trails National Monument ensures the biological connectivity of this landscape and contains a stunning collection of mountain ranges, ancient lava flows, and large sand dunes in addition to containing the longest remaining undeveloped stretch of Route 66. The Monument contains some of the best preserved sites from the World War II-era Desert Training Center. It also preserves recreational and traditional uses such as hunting and OHVing. A Monument Advisory Committee has been established under the Desert Advisory Committee (DAC) and is in the process of contracting Class 1 Cadastral Surveys, working with Tribes and the public as the Monument moves to develop its’ management plan. A ‘Notice of Intent (NOI)’ is scheduled to be published in the Federal Register in early May 2023 with scoping meetings to follow to solicit public input for the plan.

3. Bureau of Land Management Renewable Energy updates were provided by Shelly Lynch, California Desert District (CDD) Director BLM. The District is reviewing a large amount of Solar, Wind, and Geothermal energy applications and the brief also included an overview of some transmission line undertaken per Section 368 of the ‘Energy Policy Act of 2006’. The ‘West Wide Energy Corridor’ initiative as part of the Act was delayed due to a lawsuit. The large majority of the sites are located in ‘Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) designated energy zones, i.e. for example Solar application in previously designated ‘Solar Energy Zones (SEZ)’ per the DRECP. Additional ‘Western Solar PEIS/RMP’ information is available at [EplanningUi (blm.gov)](https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2022371/510) and additional scoping information for BLM’s Utility-Scale Solar Energy Programmatic EIS for California as well as additional general information can be found at [Solar PEIS Handout California (blm.gov)](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/2022371/200538533/20072525/250078707/Solar%20PEIS%20Handout_CA_508compliant.pdf). Other discussion items included need to review projects for foreign government connections under the purview of the ‘Committee for Foreign Investment in the United States (CIFIUS)’ as a concern. While other comments were made on the clearing and leveling of large swaths of desert that have disturbed the desert patina/crust, making the areas prone to increased airborne dust and increasing regional haze and airborne particulates in Air Quality Districts that already have attainment issues.

4. Mason Voehl, the Executive Director of the Amargosa Conservancy provided an overview of the area and the Conservancy’s ongoing actions in the Amargosa Basin area. The Amargosa Basin, ‘a river in the desert’, supports a wide variety of rare and unique species and habitats, to include springs, marshes, dunes, and mesquite bosques. The Amargosa River Basin **desert watershed spans an area of California and Nevada and contains the only free-flowing river in the Mojave Desert.**  The basin is also one of the greatest biodiversity hotspots in the U.S. and faces existential threats from groundwater extraction and climate change. The Conservancy has a great website that highlights its’ efforts as it ‘works toward a sustainable future for the Amargosa River and Basin through Science, Stewardship, and Education.’ Near the river’s final termination point it supports the critically endangered Devil’s Hole Pupfish population which in the latest population survey has remained stable for the last couple of years at 175 fish. The basin is also home and habitat to several unique species, among which is the Federally endangered Amargosa vole. The area also provides specialty habitat for many equally adapted plants such as the Niterwort and Woolly Sage. The Conservancy is working with other Federal and State Agencies and partners to closely monitoring the pressures on the aquifer that feeds the river and the riparian areas around it and to protect this unique resource. [Amargosa Conservancy - A River in the Desert - Amargosa Conservancy](https://www.amargosaconservancy.org/).

5. Peter Sanzenbacher, Palm Springs Fish and Wildlife Office provided highlights on some of the many actions and projects the Palm Springs Office is working on followed by a presentation for the Mohave Ground Squirrel, which though not listed under the Federal ESA it is listed as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA).

-FWS is working on a ‘General Conservation Plan (GCP)’ for the Desert Tortoise (DT) which will cover actions for the species range in California

-FWS is also reviewing ongoing DT Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP) actions for the tortoise.

- The Inyo Rock Daisy has a very limited distribution in the Mojave found only in swaths of calcareous rock outcrops in California’s southern Inyo Mountains. In 2022 the FWS was petitioned to list the Inyo Rock Daisy under the Federal Endangered Species Act and more recently published a 90-day finding in March 2023 that the petition presented sufficient information that listing may be warranted. The Service will now work on a Species Status Assessment and 12-month finding that will be completed in 2026 to determine if listing is warranted. FWS has been coordinating with the Ridgecrest BLM on this species.

-White-margined penstemon is a low-growing perennial that favors sandy washes and dunes is also under review for listing. This rare Mojave Desert species has an unusual tripartite distribution with disjunct localities in Arizona, California, and Nevada. FWS was recently petitioned to list this species and is working on a 90-day finding to evaluate the petition. Nevada FWS Offices have the lead for this action.

-Inyo California Towhee is continuing to be monitored and remains listed as an endangered species, however, it was proposed for delisting in 2013. Both the BLM and China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station have contributed to recovery actions, including installing and maintaining fencing around some springs occupied by towhees to exclude burros from these springs. The Towhee requires thick riparian vegetation which is obviously limited naturally in the desert which with the destruction of this vegetation from feral animal grazing, recreational activities, water diversion, and mining significantly degraded and reduced the towhee’s already limited habitat.

-Lane Mountain Milk Vetch also has an ongoing 5 year review that the Palm Springs Office is working on.

-One out of the area but of general interest was an update on the California Condor population in and around Tehachapi. The ‘Wind Energy Corridor Action Team’ (WECAT) is a group of wind energy projects that has applied for an incidental take permit for condors during operations of projects. If FWS issues this permit WECAT would fund the Peregrine Fund’s captive rearing center to produce 35 additional condors as part of the permit mitigation. Recently the condor flock in Arizona/Utah has experienced a large amount of fatalities (20 birds) due to Avian Influenza.

-Other administrative actions include the ongoing review of DoD Installation Natural Resource Management Plans (INRMPs) with NTC Fort Irwin review almost complete and MCAGCC Twentynine Palms INRMP in progress.

-Mohave Ground Squirrel presentation covered many of the research and management actions that are proposed for the species. These include monitoring, a captive breeding program, and the proposal to develop a ‘Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP)’ for the species. Though not listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act, it has been petitioned to be listed twice, once in 1993 however the 90 day finding determined that the petition did not present substantial information that listing may be warranted and again in 2005 where 12 month finding determined that listing again was not warranted. In 2022, the California Department of Wildlife (CDFW) published “A Conservation Strategy for the Mohave Ground Squirrel *Xerospermophilus mohavensis*” and after a conservation summit a group formed the Mohave Ground Squirrel Conservation Council (MGSCC) with proposals to develop a (1) Captive breeding program, (2) Conduct Rangewide population monitoring program, (3) Habitat evaluation, and (4) Undertake a Genetics analysis of the population. A Mohave ground squirrel research program that informs conservation and management of the species is needed and could enable better decisions for the management of the species. Better decisions could lead to stabilization and prevent the need to list the Mohave ground squirrel under the Federal Endangered Species Act. A copy of the brief was disseminated earlier and is available upon request.

6. Kristina Brown, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms provided an overview of the ‘King of the Hammers (KOH)’. MCAGCC provided an excellent overview and a summary of the massive ongoing coordination and planning efforts that make the annual International ‘King of the Hammers’ Off highway vehicle races happened every February. The promoter operating under BLM Special Recreation Permit and DoD Real Estate agreements brings in race teams and spectators from all around the world. The series of races use a route that is more than 150 miles – the majority of it is held on BLM land thought 38 miles cuts through the Combat Center Special Use Area. This year there were 900 competitors in the various races. A basecamp/encampment, approximately 56 acres in size, supports the KOH Headquarters, maintenance/pit area, medical, security, 300 vendor sales, food booths, restrooms, and entertainment stages to include Jumbo Tron screens and ‘Monster Music Stages’, as well as spectator sites and is collectively known as ‘Hammertown, USA’. The events ongoing coordination has been a result of great efforts by all parties involved, the Event Coordinator, BLM, local Community, and MCAGCC, literally starting as the race concludes and is conducted continuously throughout the year until the next event begins. The race brings a huge economic impact to the local community and also provides temporary employment opportunity for the community as well. Cleanup and removal of all materials and trash is completed and the desert returned to a near pristine level until the next year under the purview of the BLM permit. A video overview is available on ‘You Tube’ <https://youtu.be/22oezl0xpyw>. The brief was previously sent out but is available upon request.

7. Mike Gauthier, Acting Superintendent at Lake Mead National Recreation Area and Mojave Preserve Superintendent provided updates on the Mojave, Lake Mead, and a new public safety information initiative in his presentation.

-Lake Mead National Recreation Area is the 5th most visited NPS unit (data from 2021) and hosted 7.6 million visitors in 2021 with a count of 5.5 million visitors coming in 2022. The recreation area with 750 miles of shoreline provides a wide range of activities that range from motorized recreational boating and kayaking, to biking, hiking, camping, fishing, swimming, backcountry vehicle camping, and night sky viewing. The National Recreation Area brings in around $428 million in economic output for gateway communities. The NPS in charge of the area is working on several actions that include developing a ‘Sustainable Low Water Access Plan’ and an ‘Environmental Assessment Exploratory management action that will review lake access concepts to sustain motorized boating, implementing the ‘Inflation Reduction Act’ to staff and hire positions that contribute to the park as well as regional, and national NPS priorities, and the utilization of the ‘Great American Outdoors Act’ to leverage funds for projects to preserve, maintain, and enhance public lands for visitor recreation and enjoyment in the future.

-Wildlife overpasses over major highways and rail lines were discussed as a positive item to help with both vehicle/public safety and preservation of wildlife allowing safe passage and preventing genetic isolation of isolated populations.

-A Proclamation establishing the ‘Avi Kwa Ame National Monument’ and a brief update on the special sunrise tribal celebration and commemoration as well as the public ceremony later in the day in Las Vegas on 21 March 2023. The national monument spans approximately 506,814 acres of lands managed by the Interior Department’s Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation and National Park Service.The Monument will be managed from the Las Vegas BLM Office and the designation includes ‘Spirit Mountain. The mountain and surrounding area are considered to be among the most sacred places on Earth by the Mojave, Chemehuevi, and some Southern Paiute people. It is also important to Tribal Nations and Indigenous Peoples including the Cocopah, Halchidhoma, Havasupai, Hopi, Hualapai, Kumeyaay, Maricopa, Pai Pai, Quechan, Yavapai, and Zuni Tribes. The area is also home to expansive Joshua tree forests and provides important habitat for species such as the desert bighorn sheep, desert tortoise and Gila monster.  [Avi Kwa Ame National Monument | Bureau of Land Management (blm.gov)](https://www.blm.gov/avi-kwa-ame-national-monument).

-The Park Service has developed a new public safety campaign to raise awareness in motorists to slow way down, follow posted speed limits, be aware of road conditions, wildlife on the roads, and obey/do not cross or go around barriers/closed roads.

The campaign ‘Drive like a Tortoise’ in order to reduce and prevent vehicle fatalities and injuries due predominantly to excess speeds. Goal for this campaign is to reduce driving fatalities and injuries through awareness and have various agencies issue a coordinated press release in late May or early June -before summer season, install signs and promote messaging, while asking/tasking employees to be models of safe driving practice even when responding to emergencies. From last DMG Meeting, the ‘REMINDER from Mojave Preserve: DO NOT DRIVE AROUND ROAD BARRIERS’. Additionally Mike came with multiple road size signs, posters, and magnets to assist the various Agencies in promulgating the message, ‘Drive like a Tortoise’.

8. Alison Ainsworth, Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units-Pacific West Region and National Park Service provide a presentation and overview of the ‘Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units’ in the US. The Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESU) Network is a national consortium of federal agencies, tribes, academic institutions, state and local governments, nongovernmental conservation organizations, and other partners working together to support informed public trust resource stewardship. The CESU Network includes more than[490 nonfederal partners](http://www.cesu.psu.edu/materials/partners.htm)and [18 federal agencies](http://www.cesu.psu.edu/materials/partners.htm) across [seventeen CESUs](http://www.cesu.psu.edu/unit_portals/cesu_units_splash.htm) representing biogeographic regions encompassing all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. insular areas. The CESU Network is well positioned as a platform to support research, technical assistance, education and capacity building that is responsive to long-standing and contemporary science and resource management priorities. There are seventeen CESUs that are identified by various region across the country that are developed to bring together scientists, resource managers, students, and other conservation professionals, drawing upon expertise from across the biological, physical, social, cultural, and engineering disciplines (from **A**nthropology to **Z**oology) to conduct collaborative and interdisciplinary applied projects that address natural and cultural heritage resource issues at multiple scales and in an ecosystem context. Each CESU is structured as a working collaborative with participation from numerous federal and nonfederal institutional partners. CESUs are based at host universities and focused on a particular biogeographic region of the country.

[CESU National Network (psu.edu)](http://www.cesu.psu.edu/default.htm). She also presented some additional information and updates on previously designated ‘biospheres’ and Landscape level Partnering, using examples such as the ‘Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS)’ that uses the CESU framework to bring together partners, expertise, and funding.

9. DMG Attendee Roundtable updates.

-Mike Hamilton, MCIWEST provided a quick background and update on the possibility of all or part of the Mojave and DMG area of interest could be a candidate for designation of a ‘Sentinel Landscape’. Initial scoping and format should be out sometime in May timeframe for 2024 Sentinel Landscape proposals.

-NTC Fort Irwin, Chad Utz, stated that the Installation hosts up to 10 operational training rotations a year and is currently partnering with Edwards AFB to coordinate Air Space in the Western Training Area.

-NTC Western Training Area is preparing to relocate 600 Desert Tortoises to enable to safeguard tortoise and minimize impacts to training. Planned relocation area is 103,000 acres that have been procured by Irwin for conservation. Currently 440 Desert Tortoise have been fitted with radio transmitters to enable tracking.

- On 7 April 2023 Fort Irwin published the Final Legislative Environmental Impact Statement for Military Training and Public Land Withdrawal Extension Fort Irwin CA to the Federal Register.

-NTC invited USFWS to NTC to collect seeds from the Lane Mountain Milk-Vetch

-NTC has trained over 60 Soldiers in handling Desert Tortoises if in Harms ways in accordance with the Fort Irwin’s Biological Opinion.

-NTC Fort Irwin, David Davis, updated with the following additional items.

-The Base has documented blooms (relative previously 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.” The Base has had depressed precipitation levels (e.g., 0.5-1.5 in./yr) and has documented CYDE and LMMV in dormancy for 5-6 years. Last year’s winter rain produced blooms on both CYDE and LMMV, but no fruit. We are hopeful this year’s winter/spring rains will produce fruit. NTC plans to collect seeds from LMMV and will coordinate these efforts with USFWS Jeremy Bisson. This data will benefit questions on longevity and dormancy of CYME and LMMV and will also provide a seed bank for the future.

-NTC is assisting conservation efforts and is coordinating with the recently created Mohave Ground Squirrel Conservation Council (MGSCC). We plan to assist MGSCC with trapping and capture of 10-12 MGS on the Western Training Area (WTA). These squirrels will be part of a captive breeding program based off the installation, perhaps at Palm Springs. These proactive measures along with informative research may prevent future listing of MGS under the ESA.

-In 2022 with our current MOU we have caught and removed 350+ burros that will soon be adopted off NTC.

-NTC INRMP is currently in review by CDFW.

-NTC Ft Irwin is experiencing high turnover rate in their Natural Resources Division and have currently have several vacancies.

-NRSW/DoD REC 9, Jessica Palmer, stated that climate resiliency along with Climate Change water reliability and energy resiliency remain top priorities for Navy Region Southwest with a plan to utilize this information to modernize and mitigate future climate change impacts. 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.

-MCLB Barstow, Dave Housman, provided updates for the base that included ongoing efforts to remove trash and other debris on their ranges.

-The Base has also set up camera traps on the ranges to record wildlife presence and actions.

-MCLB Barstow INRMP is currently under review after major updates.

-CDD Director, Shelly Lynch, brought up the pending ‘Public Lands Rule’ and the efforts to work to restore lands and waters under this new rule which incorporates new concept of (1) Conservation Leasing (which would elevate conservation to same status of other multiple use categories, (2) Balanced responsible development, and (3) Identifying and conserving the best Healthy Landscapes for conservation as a valid FLMPA use.

-Noted that the El Centro Field Office Manager position remains vacant – working to fill this position.

Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake (NAWSCL) report for the DMG:

-Julie Hendrix attended, representing NAWSCL Environmental Division, and Donna Ogilvie, NAWSCL Installation Environmental Program Director

-Susan Williams attended, representing NAWCWD Ranges

-NAWSCL (given by Julie Hendrix)

* No updates: NAWSCL continues as a legal party in ongoing litigation re: California Sustainable Groundwater Management Act and issues related to the 6-054 INDIAN WELLS VALLEY
* 2019 Earthquake recovery ongoing, several projects complete, others still in work for at least next 3-4 years
* Working on a (minor) INRMP update
* Working on climate adaptation – engaging on Pollinators and Monarch, continuing adaptive fire management. On track with all federally listed species and will continue to work to prevent Mohave ground squirrel ESA listing
* Navy/BLM Randsburg Road Crossing Agreement finalized, signed by BLM and Navy and effective Feb 19, 2023 – significant joint interagency accomplishment, previous agreement was outdated and BLM designated areas (Spangler expansion) changed since last signed

-NAWCWD Ranges (given by Susan Williams)

* Fire Management – wanted to find out what it would take to put a fire Cooperative agreement into place with BLM Fire
* Sustainability Office working on Renewable Energy and its effects on the mission of the ranges and Ground Water issues

-JOINT NAWSCL/NAWCWD

* Showed publicly available tortoise/raven awareness video. Public link: [Protecting the Mojave Desert Tortoise\_FULL (vimeo.com)](https://vimeo.com/754877631/a8062194ad?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=129852135)

Specific to NAWSCL biological opinion requirements, but covers:

1. How to ID a tortoise burrow

2. Raven impacts (human subsidies/don't feed/water wildlife/contain trash)

3. Check around vehicles and equipment

4. Stay on approved roads and in approved test site/project/laydown areas, plus HOW TO SAFELY MOVE TORTOISE OFF A ROAD/OUT OF PROJECT AREA

5. Report all live tortoise sightings on roads or in work areas

6. Report all dead tortoise sightings

* Updated/edited (in writing) the POC printed attendance/membership list for NAWSCL/NAWCWD for general administrative/recordkeeping

BLM Ridgecrest Field Office, Tom Bickauskas, stated that their Wildhorse/Burro staffing is now fully staffed. Additionally they are coordinating with the Navy to schedule and conduct a census of Horses and Burros.

-Desert Tortoise Natural Research Area (DTRNA) celebrated 50 years of establishment along with the work of the Desert Tortoise Preserve Committee, the BLM’s partner.

-Possible waterline is in the design phase to move water from California City to Ridgecrest. Currently NEPA and CEQA actions are being formulated.

-MOU for the transfer of ‘Wash Road’ has been completed. The access road separates the ‘Spangler Open Use Area’ where six crossing areas have been designated to allow OHV access with minimal disruption to the road and to enhance safety.

10. DMG had the opportunity to tour the Needles Regional Museum and the ‘El Garces’ in Needles on Day 1. The El Garces, built to suggest a Greek temple, opened in 1908 (after the original wooden Depot burned down in 1906) to serve as a freight and passenger depot. The design by architect, Francis S. Wilson, was built to be both a functional facility as well as a very luxurious hotel with restaurant amenities. It became a Harvey House, one of an extensive line of cafes and hotels along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. The tour was informative and provided a great overview for that enhanced the meeting and provided and opportunity once again to learn more about this part of the desert, its’ history and culture in this part of the California desert and of Needles another town built by the railroad. A special thanks to the Needles Chamber of Commerce, Friends of the El Garces, and Mike Thornton who was the tour guide and presenter for this event.

11. Next meeting is scheduled for 18 - 19 October 2023, co-hosted by the BLM Ridgecrest Office – NAWS China Lake, in Ridgecrest, California. The BLM office address is 300 S. Richmond Blvd, Ridgecrest, CA, 93555.

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.

Again 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/).

 C. M. Hamilton