17 Nov 2023

Subj: DESERT MANAGERS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY, BUREAU OF LAND

 MANAGEMENT FIELD OFFICE, RIDGECREST CALIFORNIA

 18-19 OCT 2023

1. The Desert Managers Group held its Fall semiannual meeting 18-19 October 2023 at the Bureau of Land Management Ridgecrest Field Office. The meeting was co-hosted by the BLM Field Office and the Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake (NAWSCL). A copy of the presentations given at the meeting are available upon request (and were distributed by email). Attendees included representatives from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the National Park Service (NPS), 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, and MCAGCC Twentynine Palms.

2. **NAWSCL** Commanding Officer, Captain Jeremy Vaughan (USN), provided a great history, background, and overview of operations for the Air Weapons Station that included various statistics, and key points of interest for the approximately 1,100,000 acre facility, an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. Originally established and designated as Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS) in 1943, it has a rich history of research and innovation, evolving from the requirement to have facilities to test and evaluate rockets being developed for the Navy by the California Institute of Technology (CalTech) to providing the Navy with much needed proving ground for aviation ordnance.

China Lake is the United States Navy's largest single landholding, representing 85% of the Navy's land and is focused on weapons and armaments research, development, acquisition, testing, and evaluation (RDAT&E). The Station is home to 23 Tenant commands which includes the Naval Air Warfare Center. The Installation has roughly $3 billion plus of infrastructure with over 4,500 buildings and facilities, 1,307 miles of paved and unpaved roads, 1 Large airfield with three runways, two UAS strips, and two launch pads. NAWSCL also has a Geothermal Production Plant, COSO Navy-2, maintained and operated by Civilian Contractor under a joint agreement, producing 80 MW of electricity that services the California grid.

The Installation jointly controls the restricted and controlled airspace known as R-2508 Special Use Airspace (SUA) Complex in conjunction with Edwards Air Force Base and Fort Irwin for an area that spans an additional 19,600 square miles (51,000 km2).

Continuing to demonstrate a long legacy of resilience, NAWS has worked hard to recover from damages from two earthquakes, a 5.4 magnitude earthquake and the most recent, a 7.1 magnitude quake that occurred in 2019. Despite heavy damage, the Facility recovered quickly with 18 Military Construction (MILCON) contracts exceeding $2.3 Billion awarded by Congress with construction completed in record time. Concurrently during this post earthquake recovery period, the Air Station also managed two large Wildland Fires and is working to complete MOUs with regional and local firefighting agencies in addition to recovering from heavy flooding from a Pacific Hurricane in August of 2023.

The Naval Air Weapons Station is heavily engaged in community involvement, outreach and engagement with NAWS China Lake leaders engaging constantly throughout the year with local groups, schools, municipalities, agencies, and routinely volunteer for annual speaking roles. The Station employs one out of five residents in Ridgecrest and had an economic impact of over $579 Million in the local community per 2023 data. Concurrently the Air Station was able to leverage over $161 Million for community schools in the last four years from the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation (OLDCC) with additional funds pending for the local community. Finally the NAWS Airshow will return in 2025/2026 featuring the Blue Angels.

3. The **BLM Ridgecrest** Field Manager Tom Bickauskas also provided initial welcome remarks and provided an overview of the Ridgecrest Field Office, another large area, spanning over 1.8 million acres. The history of the Department of Interior, which was established in 1849 is long and detailed with the current Bureau of Land Management (BLM) created relatively recently established in 1946 by Congress. The BLM was established through a merger of the General Land Office, the Grazing Service, and the Oregon and California (O&C) Revested Lands Administration. These organizations set the groundwork for BLM, which initially was an agency focused on ‘land disposal and divestment,’ has since evolved to an organization that encompasses a wide range of multi-use management functions including Mining, Recreation, Renewable Energy siting, Conservation, as well as Wild Horse and Burro management. The Ridgecrest Office, originally established in 1974 as part of the Bakersfield District within the Inyokern Resource Area Office is administratively under the BLM California Desert District (CDD).

The Ridgecrest Field Office manages four open Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) Recreation Areas, that include Jawbone Canyon, Dove Springs, Spangler Hills OHV Open Area, and Olancha Dunes. The Ridgecrest Office manages three Special Designation Areas, Trona Pinnacles, Fossil Falls Campground, and Red Mountain. The Office oversees 17 Wilderness Areas and one designated Wilderness Study Area within their management area and has 35 Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) designated within its’ boundary areas well. The Field Office also has 83 miles of the ‘Pacific Coast Trail’ that transits their management area.

The Ridgecrest Field Office has several projects underway including several renewable energy projects, transmission lines, mining operations, and general recreation opportunities and events. One notable project on the list discussed at the meeting is the proposed Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority water pipeline that would be partially located on BLM lands. The goal of this project is to provide additional water to the City of Ridgecrest and the Indian Wells Valley. The proposed pipeline would stretch between California City and Ridgecrest and include a right-of-way and authorization to construct a 50-mile buried pipeline up to 24-inches in diameter, of which 21 miles would pass through BLM-managed public lands. The right of way for the pipeline would cross three BLM ACECs: El Paso to Golden Valley, Western Rand Mountains and Fremont-Kramer. The proposed project would also include the construction of three booster pump stations and a regulating station, which would be necessary to pump the water over the El Paso Mountains between California City and Ridgecrest. The project plan would include design features to mitigate potential conflict with the desert tortoise, Mohave ground squirrel, and other natural and cultural resources in these areas. The NEPA Analysis and comment period are underway with substantive written comments due NLT 4 November 2023.

4. ‘**Wild Horse and Burro’** update was provided next by the BLM Ridgecrest Field Manager, Tom Bickauskas. This brief as well as the ongoing monitoring and control efforts are a collaboration between NAWSCL and the Ridgecrest Field Office for which they share responsibility for their designated ‘Herd Areas (HAs)’ and ‘Herd Management Areas (HMAs)’. All management actions to include surveys, monitoring, roundups and removals are governed by ‘The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (as amended by Congress in 1976, 1978, 1996, and 2004)’. The Department of Interior has the overall management responsibility and has delegated these actions to the BLM for the areas here. BLM manages free-roaming wild horses and burros on public lands as part of its multiple-use mission, with the goal of supporting healthy wild horses and burros on viable public rangelands.  The BLM is responsible for determining and maintaining appropriate management levels (AMLs) for each herd and works to achieve that population target through a variety of management processes, including limiting reproduction in some herds through the use of birth control and round ups that remove excess animals from the range. Maintaining herd size at the appropriate management level is the best way to ensure healthy horses and burros on healthy rangelands.

5. ‘Fish and Wildlife’ update was provided by Peter Sanzenbacher and Brian Croft from the Palms Spring FWS Office. The Palms Springs Office is organized into a Colorado and Mojave Desert Division and Peter provided the following updates.

For the **Colorado Desert Division** updates included:

**Renewable Energy Projects Approved:** Recently Approved Solar Projects– Desert Harvest, Palen, Oberon, Arica, Victory Pass with 20,000 acres of mitigation.

**Pending Renewable Energy Projects:** Easley, Sapphire, Lycan, and East Mesa Solar, all of these are within BLM/DRECP Development Focus Areas (DFAs).

Additionally the Service is coordinating with California Energy Commission on three geothermal projects near the Salton Sea.

**Other areas for the Colorado Division include:** Working with BLM on conservation of desert pupfish at San Felipe Creek and Dos Palmas Preserve, and the completion of the programmatic consultation for Salton Sea restoration projects.

The **Mojave Desert Division** updates included: The issue of condor incidental take permits granted to the Wind Energy California Condor Working Group (WECAT).

WECAT is a group of 24 wind operators in the Tehachapi Wind Resource Area.

- Developing a General Conservation Plan for the Desert Tortoise in California.

- Working on individual habitat conservation plans and incidental take permits

for Desert Breeze and Overnight Solar Projects and Oro Grande Cement.

- Coordinating on Indian Valley Wells Groundwater Authority Water Pipeline.

- Participating on the Mohave Ground Squirrel Conservation Group.

- Coordinating an interagency group on Inyo California Towhee conservation.

- Developing an interagency Cooperative Management Agreement.

- Working on Inyo rock daisy conservation petitioned to list with positive 90-day finding in spring 2023.

- Recently petitioned to list Tecopa Bird’s Beak – working on 90-day finding.

Brian Croft, FWS Military Liaison provided an update on two of the **‘Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP)’ initiatives** being undertaken by the Palms Springs Office, one is for Desert Tortoise and the other for the Mohave Ground Squirrel. The DoD RASP Program is a partnership between DoD and DOI that was initiated in 2018. The effort is designed to better address and support the dynamics between imperiled species and military mission activities. The goals of the RASP are:

 -Developing innovative regulatory approaches and tools for achieving the purposes of the ESA in a manner consistent with both the USFWS and military mission needs and objectives;

 -Developing collaborative conservation initiatives to enhance species conservation, advance species recovery, and preclude the need to list additional species; and

 -Recognize successes while furthering the achievement of conservation goals and targets.

**Desert Tortoise RASP overview.** A Desert Tortoise RASP Implementation Plan was published in 2022 to ‘provide a concise blueprint of the strategies and resources required to conserve the Mojave desert tortoise as committed to by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service and Department of Defense in the Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (RASP) initiative’. With the following grants provided from the program.

2021 Grant: Project Name: Line Distance Sampling for Mojave Desert Tortoises in

 OrdRodman Critical Habitat Unit (CA)

 Grantee: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Grant Amount: $70,000.00

2022 Grants:

 -Project Name: Assessing & Restoring Off-Highway Vehicle Impacts on

 Conservation Lands (CA)

 Grantee: Transition Habitat Conservancy, Grant Amount: $132,820.78

* 1. -Project Name: Mojave Desert Tortoise Habitat Restoration and Shared
	2. Stewardship Coordinator for the Recovery and Sustainment Partnership (CA)
	3. Grantee: Mojave Desert Land Trust, Grant Amount: $1,099,398.67
	4. -Project Name: Mojave Desert Tortoise Recovery and Sustainment Partnership
	5. Implementation in the Ord-Rodman Focal Area (CA)
	6. Grantee: Preservation Ranch, LLC., Grant Amount: $1,200,000.00

2023 Grants:

* 1. -Project Name: Improving Density and Vital Rate Estimates for Mojave Desert
	2. Tortoises in the Western Mojave Recovery Unit (CA)
	3. Grantee: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Grant Amount: $857,000.00
	4. -Project Name: Outreach and Land Acquisition to Benefit Tortoise Habitat in the
	5. Superior-Cronese Focal Areas (CA)
	6. Grantee: Desert Tortoise Recovery Partnership, Grant Amount: $585,091.11
	7. -Project Name: Reducing Human-Tortoise Conflicts by Stimulating Human
	8. Behavior Change in the West Mojave (CA)
	9. Grantee: The Living Desert, Grant Amount: $488,458.86

**Mohave Ground Squirrel (MGS) RASP** is still in development with the objectives for the MGS RASP are listed below.

***Objective 1*:** Develop a Cooperative Management Agreement and working group.

***Objective 2***: Increase research and monitoring to better assess species status and threats.

* 1. Implement range wide surveys to assess distribution and abundance.
	2. Long-term monitoring within core populations to assess population health.
	3. Population viability analysis core populations and the species as a whole.
	4. Evaluate the feasibility of translocation, captive propagation, and reintroduction.
	5. Perform research to evaluate threats.

***Objective 3:*** Assess existing land use planning across the range of the species.

***Objective 4:*** Implement management actions to address current threats.

* 1. Land acquisition in core and linkage areas.
	2. Close and restore unauthorized routes in core and linkage areas.
	3. Expand regional raven management activities.
	4. Increase law enforcement capacity in core and linkage areas.

***Objective 5***: Secure long-term funding.

6. ‘**Abandoned Mineral Lands of the Mojave Preserve’** and an update on the **‘Drive Like a Tortoise’**, a safe driving awareness campaign were provided by Sofia Andeskie, Mojave National Preserve. Mining in the area now designated as Mojave National Preserve commenced in the mid-1800s. Mining efforts included prospecting and extracting gold, silver, copper, scoria, and other minerals. Within the preserve boundary there have been 758 abandoned mineral land (AML) mine sites identified with more than 11,500 mining features attributed to these sites. These sites are both historically and archeologically significant, but also pose a risk to human and wildlife physical safety as well as potential contamination from mining activity. The brief was very detailed and provided some great illustrative pictures for the projects.

Mojave National Preserve has worked with theCalifornia Department of Conservation (DOC) to identify and inventory mines in its boundaries. A Cooperative Agreement with the DOC was completed in 2010 and began the effort to establish the mine inventory and rank the mines in terms of hazard and accessibility, with recommended remediations for each feature as well as estimated cost to complete these actions. These efforts are extremely detailed and are very long term as detailed below.

For **contaminated abandoned mineral lands:** The stepsare to investigate, identify, and if necessary, remediate and restore contaminated abandoned mineral lands. Contamination for mining sites include high levels of arsenic, lead, cyanide, and other heavy metals and contaminants found in the sediment tailings, waste rock, leach pads, pregnant ponds, and more. To remediate the contaminates, Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) is followed, with the steps including identifying (or attempting to identify) Potentially Responsible Party (PRP), followed by a Preliminary Assessment (PA) of the site, next step is to develop the ‘Site Investigation (SI) Sampling and Analysis Plans (SAPs)’, and then developing an Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis (EE/CA) SAP. Once the EE/CA SAP is completed, the Non-Time Critical Removal Action Plan (NTCRAP) is developed and then finally, the undertaking and completion of the Non-Time Critical Removal Action, a very lengthy process, taking anywhere from 10-20 years to complete involving heavy equipment, soil removal, adding clean backfill, grading and contouring, and revegetation.

**Physical safety mitigations** for various types of mine features (shafts, adits, inclines) protect wildlife and visitors from potential safety hazards, in addition to protecting and preserving these sites for their natural, cultural, and paleontological resources. However, in addition to restricting entry, measures to allow wildlife that use these structures for habitat must also be considered and implemented. Bat cupolas, bat cages, gates, wire netting and signage are used to maintain safety and facilitate wildlife usage.

An update for the **‘Drive Like a Tortoise’** program was also provided. ‘Drive Like a Tortoise’ is a safe driving awareness initiative designed to remind both the general public and employees to be aware of driving conditions and wildlife in the desert to include open BLM Lands, Park areas, as well as other lands and roads. “What does it mean to Drive Like A Tortoise?” It means being cautious, alert, and patient behind the wheel. Follow these simple guidelines to practice safe driving:

-Always observe the speed limit.

-Stay aware of your surroundings.

-Avoid reckless maneuvers that put yourself and others at risk.

More information is available at: [Drive Like a Tortoise - Lake Mead National Recreation Area (U.S. National Park Service) (nps.gov)](https://www.nps.gov/lake/planyourvisit/drive-like-a-tortoise.htm)

7. ‘**Mojave and Colorado Desert Biosphere’** update was presented by Emma Rosenau, Death Valley NP. Death Valley is working to bring the previous Biosphere designation for the region up to date. The Mojave Desert Biosphere is part of a larger World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) under the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ‘Man and the Biosphere Program’ founded in 1971. The Biosphere Program is designed to “foster the harmonious integration of people and nature for sustainable development through participatory dialogue, knowledge sharing, poverty reduction, human well-being improvements, respect for cultural values and by improving society's ability to cope with climate change.” There are currently 738 sites in 134 countries located around the globe. There are 28 Biospheres designated in the US. The actions for these areas are non-regulatory and maintain only an honorary recognition. All existing local, tribal, state, and national government regulatory authority is unchanged and participation is completely voluntary. The goals of the program are to Conserve Biodiversity within ecosystem functions while maintaining cultural heritage; Develop equitable, sustainable livelihoods; and provide Logistical Support through coordination, and various projects that take into account local capacities.

The Mojave and Colorado Desert Biosphere’ was established in 1984 and renewed in 2017. The area was identified as a biosphere due to its’ extreme temperature, precipitation, and elevation differences as well as the various endemic and endangered species, and the importance for recreation adjacent to 2nd largest population center in the country while also under multiple renewable energy development pressures. The area is just over 25 million acres in size and the designated area is approximately 75% federal land and encompasses approximately 1 million residents (predominantly rural in nature). It is the ancestral home to several Native American tribes including the Timbisha, Shoshone, Cahuilla, Mohave, and Chemehuevi. The next Steps for the Biosphere Region are to continue to make and strengthen partnerships, focusing across the area on Federal and state agencies, NGOs, communities with communication and information sharing to include spatial and GIS products, as well as written and visual communications. There is a Mojave and Colorado Deserts Biosphere Region Workshop – 28 November 2023 at the Mojave National Preserve office, Barstow, 0900-1630.

8. ‘**California State Legislative Update**’ was given by Veronica Badillo, Navy Regional Environmental Coordination Office. She provided a brief background on the makeup of the California State Legislature with emphasis on the fact that both the Assembly and Senate have a Democratic Party ‘Super Majority’, and what the schedule is for a typical legislative calendar year and the two year legislative cycle. For this current session there have been 2,863 Introduced Bills in 2023, of which 416 were closely reviewed by DoD, six of these have some DMG nexus and were highlighted in her presentation, these are listed below:

-AB 985 (Arambula, 2023) San Joaquin Valley Air District:Would have set an expiration date to Emission Reduction Credits in the District.

-AB 1716 (Committee on Environmental Safety & Toxins, 2023) Hazardous Waste: Certified Unified Program Agencies (CUPA):Elements of this bill could have shut down a facility for failure to pay CUPA fees.

-AB 627 (Jackson, 2023) Heavy Duty Trucks:Would have prohibited after 01/01/2030, a person from operating a diesel-fueled heavy-duty truck on the city streets or county roads located in the Counties of Riverside or San Bernardino. (Held in Asm Transportation).

-AB 444 (Addis, 2023) CA Defense Community Infrastructure Program:Would (upon appropriation) establish the CA DCIP and require OPR to grant funds to local agencies to assist with matching funds for federal DCIP. (Held in Sen Appropriations).

**-**AB 475 (Mathis, 2023) Sensitive military land: foreign ownership and interests:Would have prohibited a foreign government from purchasing any land located within 50 miles of an Active or CANG military base within the state. (Held in Asm Judiciary).

-SB 576 (Nguyen, 2023) General plans: military sites:Would have prohibited high-density housing from being built within a 5-mile radius of a military installation or other site deemed sensitive to national security by the DoD (Held in Sen Governance & Finance).

She ended the presentation with a reminder that the DoD REC has two State Legislature Liaisons in Sacramento and that if anyone has any questions or inquiries in the future that we are here to support and assist.

9. ‘**Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscape Proposal’** was made by Phillip Murray, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms. He provided an overview and information on what a ‘Sentinel Landscape’ is defined “as areas in which natural and working lands are well suited to protect defense facilities from land use that is incompatible with the military's mission”. Once a location becomes a sentinel landscape, USDA, DoD, and DOI work with local partners to equip private landowners with the resources necessary to carry out sustainable management practices on their properties.

The Mojave Desert Sentinel Landscapes Partnership is a coalition of federal agencies, state and local governments, and NGOs that work to advance sustainable land use around military installations and ranges. He provided a timeline for planning and execution to complete the formal agreement, comments from the Federal Coordinating Committee, Governance for the Sentinel Landscape (if approved), as well as the next steps. Due date for the formal submission is 18 January 2024.

10. An update for the proposed ‘**Chuckwalla National Monument**’ and proposed ‘Joshua Tree Expansion’ were provided by Linda Castro, CAL WILD. She provided maps of the areas and discussed the applicable sections from the Legislation, HR 5660 from Representative Ruiz (CA 25th District). The proposed Chuckwalla National Monument, named for the large lizard found in the desert region, would be contiguous to Joshua Tree National Park’s southern boundary, stretching along Interstate 10 from the edge of the eastern Coachella Valley all the way to the Colorado River. The proposed monument is nearly 700,000 acres and would include land in both Riverside and Imperial counties. In addition to the national monument proposal, the Protect California Deserts campaign is separately proposing to expand Joshua Tree National Park to the east in the Eagle Mountain area.

There are two avenues to national monument status: a vote by Congress or a presidential designation under the Antiquities Act. Both routes have been used in the Coachella Valley region ― the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument was established by Congress in 2000, and more recently, then-President Barack Obama established the Sand to Snow National Monument in 2016. Either option would likely start with the Congressional representative for the area, Rep. Raul Ruiz, a Democrat, who could either introduce the proposal as legislation in Congress or bring the proposal to the Biden administration, according to Barrows.

11. Roundtable comments with agency top issues and actions rounded out the Fall DMG Meeting.

 a. **NTC Fort Irwin**:

 (1) Record of Decision (ROD) Legislative Environmental Impact Statement for Training and Public Land Withdrawal Extension has been concurred at the Installation level and has been forwarded to US Army IMCOM for signing.

 (2) NTC Land Withdrawal renewal application for 117,000 acres is being staffed for inclusion in the 2026 NDAA.

 (3) ‘Environmental Assessment (EA)’ is being conducted for the upcoming Desert Tortoise Relocation of 600 Tortoises from NTC Range Land to 110,000 acres of mitigation area to the south of the Installation.

 (4) Fort Irwin is conducting a review of their ‘Installation Natural Resource Management Plan (INRMP)’.

 b. **Death Valley National Park**:

 (1) Recovering from recent major flooding (again). The Park as well as the region has experienced 4 ‘1,000 year Flood’ episodes in the past several years between 2015-2023.

 (2) Death Valley is slowly reopening after damage repairs from the latest floods and just opened two entrances to the Park the Saturday previous to the meeting, 14 October. Damage is still being assessed and repairs continue.

 (3) Similar to other National Parks and Monuments, DV continues to see high levels of visitation and with latest compilation form 2019, the park had approximately 1.7 million visitors and continues to see high numbers of visitors.

 (4) GAOA Furnace Creek Water Infrastructure upgrades continue. Some of the plumbing was original tile and clay pipes and has been long overdue.

 (5) Devil Hole Pupfish Population Inventory/Surveys showed stable populations with 175 Spring count, and 263 fish in the fall survey. Interesting the camera that is located at the Devil Hole recorded a six foot high wave in the cavern generated by the China Lake earthquake, but per population surveys the event had little effect on the fish.

 (6) DV has requested a modification to their Desert Tortoise Take Permits for ongoing construction and other work in the Park.

 (7) Currently under investigation, the Park found six wild burros shot and killed in what appears to be careless slaughter of the animals.

 c. **NAWS China Lake**:

 (1) China Lake has ongoing concerns and issues with meeting California and DoD Clean Air mandates through the use of Zero Emission Vehicles. A large amount of the Air Weapons Station is remote and accessed via rough unpaved roads which don’t facilitate any infrastructure for charging (or refilling H2) vehicles. Additionally, much of the Installation is on ranges with HERO restrictions that prohibit the use of Electric vehicles.

 (2) Commented on issues and concerns of dealing with Climate Resiliency and Climate Change and how to incorporate these into planning documents as well as future actions.

 (3) NAWSCL is working on major rewrites for both their INRMP and their ICRMP.

 (4) NAWSCL is also concurrently working on their ‘Wildlife Management Plan’

 (5) As briefed in the initial NAWSCL overview, China Lake is over \_ Million acres however to date only 20% of this area has been surveyed for Archaeological/Culturally Significant sites, however with the two recent wildfires and recent heavy rains/flooding more sites have been uncovered and both these and previously identified sites have been exposed to elements which if not surveyed or remediated soon would have deleterious impacts to the sites.

12. The next DMG meeting is planned to be held at the BLM Barstow Field Office scheduled for 17-18 April 2024.

13. Any questions, and/or additional information, contact me at (760)725-2635 or by email at Charles.hamilton@usmc.mil.

 C. M. Hamilton