



File Code: 2670

Date: JAN 27 2011

Greta Anderson
Arizona Director
Western Watersheds Project
P.O. Box 2264
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Dear Ms. Anderson:

Thank you for your recent letter requesting information regarding Forest Service (FS) intentions to protect the Sonoran desert tortoise and its habitat on FS lands in Arizona, most specifically with respect to livestock grazing. At this time the Sonoran desert tortoise is known to occur on portions of the Coronado and Tonto National Forests (NFs), and may occur on a very small portion of the Prescott NF in Arizona.

The FS has identified the Sonoran desert tortoise as sensitive on the Regional Forester's Sensitive species list since September of 2007, several years prior to its designation as a federal candidate species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in December of 2010. As a federal candidate species, the Sonoran desert tortoise will continue to be on the Regional Forester's sensitive species list in the future.

The FS sensitive species program is designed to help maintain biodiversity on National Forests and National Grasslands, and to help maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native species under CFR 219.19. FS Manual 2670.32 has the following specific direction related to species designated as Forest Service sensitive:

1. Assist states in achieving their goals for conservation of endemic species.
2. Review programs and activities as part of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) process through a biological evaluation, to determine their potential effect on sensitive species.
3. Avoid or minimize impacts to species whose viability has been identified as a concern.
4. Analyze, if impacts cannot be avoided, the significance of potential adverse effects on the population or its habitat within the area of concern and on the species as a whole. (The line officer, with project approval authority, makes the decision to allow or disallow impact, but the decision must not result in loss of species viability or create significant trends toward federal listing.)
5. Establish management objectives in cooperation with the states when projects on National Forest System lands may have a significant effect on sensitive species



population numbers or distribution. Establish objectives for federal candidate species, in cooperation with the FWS or NOAA Fisheries and the states.

As such, the Coronado, Tonto, and Prescott NFs and the FS Southwestern Regional Office have, and continue to participate in, and implement the following actions for the conservation of the Sonoran desert tortoise and its habitat:

Regional Office

The FS Southwestern Region is a signatory to the 1995 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Arizona Desert Tortoise Management and is currently addressing the need for a revised MOU with the Arizona Game and Fish Department and other signatories and interested entities. Furthermore, the FS Southwestern Region participates on the Arizona Interagency Desert Tortoise Team (AIDTT) and has representatives from the Coronado and Tonto NFs on the Team.

Under FS Southwestern Region rangeland management procedures, timing, intensity, frequency, and duration of livestock grazing are continuously evaluated for the achievement of resource management objectives. Monitoring and adaptive management are key attributes of grazing management and are intended to ensure livestock grazing outcomes meet desired resource conditions which include the needs of wildlife species, including the Sonoran desert tortoise. The goal of the rangeland management strategy is to achieve conservative use in the uplands over successive years. In reviewing this strategy, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in their December 14, 2010, 12 month status review for the Sonoran desert tortoise concluded that the implementation of the FS Southwestern Region rangeland management strategy is likely to retain the physical characteristics necessary to provide for the forage and shelter requirements of the Sonoran desert tortoise (FWS 12 month finding page 78128).

Coronado National Forest

On the Coronado NF Sonoran desert tortoise habitats are found primarily on the Santa Catalina and Nogales Ranger Districts. Much of the Forest's tortoise habitat, and all of the best habitat, is closed to livestock grazing or currently not grazed. Where grazing does occur in tortoise habitat, it is seasonal (when tortoises are not active) and restricted to light to moderate (30-45 percent) utilization. NEPA analysis has been completed for all allotments in tortoise habitat and effects to tortoises were considered in each analysis. Furthermore, the Forest is working as aggressively as possible to control buffelgrass, a non native species that is identified by the FWS as the most significant threat to the species. In addition, the Forest is closed to Off Road Vehicle (OHV) use by the public, which is also identified as a threat to the species. Lastly, the Coronado NF is building specific Forest Plan components into the draft revised Forest Plan to maintain habitats or mitigate impacts to desert tortoises in the future.

Tonto National Forest

The Sonoran desert tortoise is found on the Mesa, Globe, Cave Creek, and Tonto Basin Ranger Districts of the Tonto NF. On the Tonto NF much of the species habitat is either not grazed or allotments with habitat are currently vacant of grazing permits. OHV use is being addressed during the implementation of the Travel Management Rule as the containment of such use has

the most potential to reduce impacts to the tortoise and its habitat on the Tonto NF. Furthermore, site specific NEPA analysis is completed for all allotments in tortoise habitat and effects to tortoises are considered in each analysis.

Prescott National Forest

On the Prescott NF, Sonoran desert tortoises are known only from habitats on the eastern slopes of the Bradshaw Mountains on the Bradshaw Ranger District. Surveys conducted on the Prescott NF by the University of Arizona in 1993, found only a single burrow containing tortoise scat – no tortoises were found. It appears that there is very little suitable habitat on the Prescott NF and population densities are likely to be very low. The only grazing allotment in the area of the eastern slopes of the Bradshaw Mountains is the Horsethief allotment and NEPA analysis will be prepared in the near future for this allotment and any possible effects of livestock grazing on tortoise habitat will be evaluated and addressed at that time.

In summary, the FS has no indication that livestock grazing is a major threat to the Sonoran desert tortoise in Arizona on FS lands. This is acknowledged by the FWS in the 12 month finding for the species where the FWS concluded "...grazing effects to the Sonoran desert tortoise may occur but are likely limited in severity and scope in Arizona because habitat shared by livestock and Sonoran desert tortoises is not a significant portion in most areas and because livestock grazing is actively managed by land management agencies." Furthermore, the FWS goes on to state: "However, due to limited regulations affecting livestock management in Mexico ... we conclude that livestock grazing likely poses a threat to the Sonoran desert tortoise in Mexico."

Once again, thank you for your interest in FS policy and regulations regarding candidate species such as the Sonoran desert tortoise. If you have any further questions or concerns related to the Sonoran desert tortoise please feel free to contact Bobbi Barrera, Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive species Program Leader at (505) 842-3184 or bbarrera@fs.fed.us or Don DeLorenzo, Director Wildlife, Fish and Rare Plants Program at (505) 842-3260 or ddelorenzo@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,



CORBIN L. NEWMAN, JR.
Regional Forester

cc: Bobbi L Barrera, Richard A Gerhart, Fred Wong, Joel W Schultz, David M Stewart, Jim Upchurch, Thomas J Klabunde, Gene Blankenbaker, Michael J. Connork Ph.D, California Director, Western Watersheds Project, P.O. Box 2364, Reseda, Ca 91337