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Recovery Implementation Teams (RIT) Webinar #1
Questions Asked with Responses

Webinar Participation: Six webinars were conducted; 47 RIT members participated (87% participation).

Questions and Answers Discussed during Webinars: The questions raised over the six webinars have been collected and are presented below for the benefit of all RIT members. In some cases, the responses below may be more elaborate than what was discussed on the call, reflecting additional time since the original webinar to consider the questions in more detail. The questions and their answers are not presented in any particular order, but are listed under a set of organizing topical areas for the benefit of readers.

Recovery Implementation Team Membership, Process, & Logistics

Q: Is comment period closed after April 27, 2012?

A: This particular comment period on the Model Explorer and Data Explorer websites will be closed after April 27, 2012. We will incorporate comments and suggestions from this comment period into the 2012 version of the spatial decision support system (SDSS) that will support the development of the 2012 5-Year Action Plans. Subsequent comments will be incorporated into the SDSS to support future revisions of the 5-Year Action Plans. You may continue to submit comments, but after April 27th, the comments will not be addressed again until the following year.

Q: What is this diverse group without great knowledge of the problem really supposed to do about the problem?

A: A diverse RIT has at least two important benefits. First, it is important that the rationale underlying the SDSS is as understandable to as broad an audience as possible and feedback from a diverse RIT membership will help attain this goal. Second, once threats have been scientifically ranked according to their impacts to regional tortoise populations, as estimated by the decision support system, we encourage identification of diverse ideas about where and how to best prioritize on-the-ground management actions to address those threats.

Q: What is the budget for implementation of RITs? Where is money coming from to implement?

A: There is no “budget” for the RITs, per se. Implementation of the 5-Year Action Plans is the responsibility of the Federal and State agencies, which will incorporate the cost of implementation into their budgets. Also, we expect that many of the recovery actions identified by the RITs will be incorporated into mitigation strategies undertaken by land managers as the need arises.

Q: How are we going to assess success/effectiveness of the recovery actions?

A: Success of the RITs will be measured first by the ability of the groups to work together to produce 5-Year Action Plans. Documenting new recovery actions in the SDSS will show where measurable progress has been made in implementing the recovery plan. In addition, the SDSS contains a menu of monitoring metrics for each action so that the effectiveness of recovery actions can be measured over time. If we find that we need to adjust the recovery actions to produce a more positive effect (adaptive management), then we can do that.

Q: My RIT covers 2 states; I want to make sure that our recommendations are consistent. What is the process for ensuring this?

A: The DTRO staff will be working on all RITs and will be sure to share relevant information and recommendations across the RITs. Each RIT will have access to the other RITs' evolving 5-Year Action Plans and will be able to discuss relevant sections and proposed actions from other RITs. In addition, we can provide access to the other workgroup/RITs sharepoint site so that you can see what they are posting there.

Q: How do comments get submitted to you, in bits and pieces or in one lump on April 27?

A: The comment tool in the Data Explorer allows you to post comments at various times so you are welcome to submit comments on the data when convenient for you throughout the comment period. We will access the comments as they come in and address as needed until May 25, which is the DTRO's due date for addressing this year's comments.

Q: I don't recognize some of these names from the list we received on the representatives for West Mojave RIT. I would like to know who everyone is.

A: The full composition, with affiliations, of each RIT is posted on the website for each RIT (mojavedata.gov/deserttortoise_gov/recovery/rits.html). The initial orientation webinar was different from up-coming webinars and meetings in that all the RITs and workgroups were included together. Our goal was to get as many of the RIT members to participate and not worry about workgroup/RIT affiliation for this presentation. The next webinar will be workgroup specific, and you will have an opportunity to introduce yourselves.

Q: It looks like there are still some key spots that haven't been filled in some of the RITs. Please explain whether DTRO plans on continuing to try to fill these spots and how DTRO will get input from these constituencies if the positions remain vacant?

A: The DTRO is striving to fill the membership of each RIT. However, we have not succeeded in finding willing participants for every slot. Thus, to keep the overall recovery process moving forward, the RITs are proceeding with their work. However, the DTRO will continue to keep invited groups informed of the process and welcomes participation from interested constituencies.

Q: Do you have a sense for what kind of decision-making you will be looking for to develop the 5-Year Action Plans? Are the RITs going to try to reach consensus?

A: The RITs will have a defined process, described in the draft charter that was provided prior to the webinar. This process is designed to encourage robust consideration of all recommendations and points made during RIT discussions. As deemed helpful by the RIT members, the degree of consensus on a particular matter may occasionally be measured by having members note their level of support for items as ranging from *Unqualified Support, Strong Support, General Support,*

Qualified Support, to Fundamental Disagreement. If an item receives a level of *Fundamental Disagreement*, the group will be asked to continue working until it appears a resolution is not attainable, or move on to an area where more agreement is possible. At that time, the members will note the nature of the disagreement and make a determination as to the best way to proceed in the particular issue area, potentially including a decision to clearly identify any disagreements in the Recovery Action Plan. When, and if, a poll is taken on any matter, each participating organization will be allowed one statement. This process will be incorporated into the final Terms of Reference for RIT participation and will be discussed with each RIT during the next webinar.

Spatial Decision Support System (SDSS)

Q: Have the models in the SDSS been validated?

A: All spatial data within the system come from existing datasets, which you can explore in Data Explorer. The network of how threats affect tortoise populations, which you can review in Model Explorer, is based on Appendix A of the Revised Recovery Plan and the cited literature therein (USFWS 2011). The outputs of the system have yet to be validated, because we are just in the early phase of final model and data review to begin developing outputs to guide the RITs. As the 5-Year Action Plans developed by the RITs are implemented and monitored, we can evaluate and re-evaluate the models in the SDSS in an adaptive management framework.

Q: What data layers are you looking for us to contribute and at what scale?

A: Please provide any data, regardless of scale.

Q: Some recovery actions are already incorporated into agency management plans, so how can we compare what's planned already, what's been done, and what still needs to be done?

A: The 28 types of recovery actions which are identified in the revised recovery plan are all in the SDSS. We currently only have data about where four of these actions have already been implemented, but we are interested in incorporating data on what has already been done for other recovery actions. If you know of other specific data, those would be valuable to include in the SDSS.

Q: Are connectivity corridors on the website?

A: Yes, we have those data in the Data Explorer; look under Base layers.

Q: Is the least cost corridor map static?

A: The most recent version of the least cost corridor outputs are in the Data Explorer. We will update the site if newer outputs are developed.

Q: Does the graph showing mine closures assume 100% closure/withdrawal of mines?

A: Depending on the location, it could mean that a particular mine was closed.

Q: I assume that it's possible to define the areas inside versus outside tortoise conservation areas?

A: Yes, we will develop threat ranking and recovery action ranking for each workgroup area, plus each desert tortoise conservation area therein.

Q: Some data that we have are confidential, so is it possible for data to be viewed only by the RITs?

A: Data do not have to be made available to the public; some data can be available to the RITs only. Please provide this comment if you are submitting sensitive data.

Q: Are you working on a certain projection/scale for maps?

A: Don't worry about scale. We are using the best available range-wide data for this version of the SDSS, but we are ready to begin incorporating more locally specific information.

Q: How will FWS use our Recovery Action Plans in their consultations with other agencies, since FWS has little direct land management responsibilities?

A: Like the overarching recovery plan, Recovery Action Plans are non-regulatory documents. However, the Recovery Action Plans will provide regional priorities for recovery actions that may be useful to offset impacts of projects within those regions.

Q: Can I get a copy of the mapped invasive data for NW AZ/SW UT?

A: Yes! That is one of the great things about the Data Explorer; the data/maps are available for you to download directly from the site.

Threat Data and Threat Tracking

Q: In tracking threats over time, how can we tell if changes are from changes in dataset information versus actual recovery action results?

A: Differences in landscape-level threat mapping could potentially arise as a result of varying datasets over time. In most cases, we expect this to result in more accurate depiction of threats over time, which is a desirable outcome. However, effectiveness monitoring is not dependent on a particular spatial data set. In most cases, it will be field-collected data, so our inferences about threat abatement will continue to improve over time as effectiveness monitoring is conducted.

Q: Are threats the same value across the landscape?

A: No. The degree of each threat across the landscape is scaled against an underlying habitat probability value derived from the USGS habitat model.

Q: What is the range of threat values? Do they differ among threats?

A: The relative magnitude of each link in the complete SDSS model network was given a single weight, where all of the threats to desert tortoises combined to a total of 100 percent.

Q: How do you capture the way threats are non-static? For example, some years there could be 1,000 lbs/acre of red brome vs. other years when there are 200 lbs/acre of red brome.

A: We are not currently modeling stochasticity, rather we are modeling risk. For example, for invasive plants we are using the "risk of invasion by exotic plants" outputs in the human footprint model created by Leu et al. (2008).

Q: Did the lack of spatial data limit the inclusion of any threats?

A: While direct spatial data are not available for all threats, we derived a spatial layer from other existing datasets for threats that had no data. A goal is to replace these derived threat layers with better data as available.

Q: Is there a danger of paying too much attention to areas next to urban areas (i.e., high risk, already decimated population or extirpated and great threat) and then ignoring remote areas in which emphasis should be applied toward making sure those areas retain their integrity or avoid threats?

A: This is why we have divided landscape into workgroup areas and tortoise conservation areas. The 5-year Action Plans will focus on the tortoise conservation areas.

Renewable & Alternative Energy Projects

Q: What are the next steps for thinking about renewable energy, since that wasn't covered in the revised recovery plan? When does FWS intend to update the Revised Recovery Plan to include a chapter on energy projects?

A: Renewable energy development is discussed in a number of locations in the recovery plan. Discussions under "Reasons for Listing and Continuing Threats, Factor A" and "Appendix A, Section A8" identify the threat of large-scale energy development and the potential impacts to desert tortoises and their habitat. Implementation of a number of the recommended recovery actions would make progress towards reducing threats associated with energy development. Development of the supplemental renewable energy chapter to the recovery plan has been delayed as a result of workload associated with ongoing related conservation strategies (for example, the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan and the Bureau of Land Management's Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement). Nonetheless, RIT activities at the local level will be coordinated with landscape and regional-level alternative-energy coordination efforts.

Q: How will proposed renewable energy projects be considered by the RITs?

A: We will model new renewable energy projects as they are implemented as new threats on the landscape. We can use the ranked recovery actions for each region as a menu of potential mitigation options for renewable energy projects.

Q: Do you want FWS recommendations from past Biological Opinions for energy projects?

A: The recovery actions in the SDSS come directly from the Revised Recovery Plan. If recommendations in past Biological Opinions fall into these recovery action types, then spatial data for where these actions have been implemented would be helpful to incorporate.