

# Table Mesa Recreational Plan Core Strategy Team Meeting #2

*Deer Valley Community Center, 2001 W. Wahalla Lane, Phoenix  
Tuesday, February 3, 2009 6:00-8:30 pm*

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Those in attendance who signed the attendance sheet numbered 73 persons.

## *Welcome and Opening Comments*

*Teresa Makinen opened the meeting by welcoming the participants, reviewing the evening's agenda, and introducing the project team. She then introduced Steve Cohn to provide some opening comments to the group.*

## *Review of the Process to Date*

*Steve Cohn provided the framework and background for developing the Table Mesa Recreation Plan. The Table Mesa area is a small portion of the public lands managed by the BLM Hassayampa Field Office. This Field Office published a proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) in August 2008 that will be finalized in 2009. The RMP is a complete plan to manage all the public lands and through six years of public input, certain decisions were already established in the RMP that affect the Table Mesa lands. Mr. Cohn discussed that the public has already determined, through the RMP, that target shooting in the area will remain open where it can be safely accommodated. Other area priorities include: non-motorized use, historical use and natural resources. This includes the protection and restoration of riparian areas. BLM is looking for a compatibility of uses and users in the area.*

*Therefore, the RMP sets the stage and framework for the Table Mesa Recreation Plan that will designate roads and trails, identify safe shooting areas, recreation facilities, and partnerships. In the planning process, BLM wants to work with the public to shape the area.*

*Steve said that the area is popular and safety issues need to be addressed now. The Table Mesa Recreation Plan area encompasses 11,000 acres, part of 1 million acres that need to be planned for in the future. The proposed goal for finalizing the Recreational Plan is by the end of March 2009. (Several more steps will follow.) Steve stated he would like to identify issues and concerns now so that the agency can move on to doing things "on the ground" for the area.*

*Steve stressed to the group that everything is on the table now. To address area needs Steve said it will take many partnerships and cooperation from the public to get this plan done with the ultimate goal of improving the user experience in the area.*

*For reference, Teresa Makinen noted to the group that the Resource Management Plan Decisions could be found on the back of the meeting handout. She added that the main areas that the BLM needs to consider in planning for the area, many of which were decided in the Resource Management Plan, are as follows:*

- *Riparian areas, including the Agua Fria River and area washes.*
- *Desert Tortoise habitat areas.*
- *Accommodating multiple users in a compatible way.*
- *County and State policies.*
- *Maricopa County Air Quality laws, PM-10 area.*
- *Law enforcement concerns.*

### ***Desert Tortoise Habitat Management***

*In November 2008, the Field Office sponsored two public meetings to gather input for the Table Mesa Recreational Plan. From comments received at the two public meetings, as well as those posted on line, the staff created a first draft of planned area uses and facilities. To ensure that the public remains engaged and that the agency considers as many issues and alternatives allowed in the RMP, the BLM asked key groups to assign/appoint representatives and to come back to at least three meetings – called Core Strategy Group Meetings. These meetings were/are publically announced for: Jan 20<sup>th</sup>, Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup>; Feb. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009...and opened to the public at large, even though key organizations agreed to send the same representatives to each meeting for consistency and to move the conversations and process along. Teresa stated that at the last Core Strategy Meeting, many individuals had questions about the tortoise habitat management. The BLM agreed to have a biologist at the next meeting – tonight's meeting. She then introduced Tim Hughes, Biologist with BLM.*

*Next, Tim Hughes, a wildlife biologist with BLM, presented information on the Desert Tortoise Habitat. He stated that the Desert Tortoise has been at risk for being listed on under the Endangered Species Act; and although it was not originally listed, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is once again reviewing whether to add it to the list. In order to avoid this and in cooperation with many other federal, state and local agencies, BLM is working to actively manage Desert Tortoise Habitat. Mr. Hughes explained that if the tortoise is added to the list, there will be restrictions to the use of the land that will greatly affect the current uses. This is why the agency is actively managing the lands to avoid listing and additional restrictions. He explained that once the BLM receives an application for an activity (any activity: trails, OHV permits, mining, rights of way, etc.) that at that time a survey/review is initiated to determine whether tortoise are currently using the lands, whether the tortoise travel through the land for mating or food, whether the lands offer prime tortoise habitat, a count of tortoise seen, and other*

*factors mandated for the active management of the tortoise aimed at preventing it from being added to the Endangered list. In the case of Table Mesa OHV use, whenever new trails are proposed, those are surveyed for Desert Tortoise activity to assess where the trail is feasible, or whether there is some mitigation that needs to take place. He went on to explain likely desert tortoise habitat characteristics.*

*Tim noted that previous survey efforts do not negate the need for new site specific surveys. If a project's impact upon Desert Tortoise habitat can be mitigated or eliminated a project will be approved. When considering a proposed project, the following process is used:*

- *Look at the project proposal.*
- *Walk the project area looking for Desert Tortoise sign.*
- *If found, look at ways to mitigate impacts.*
- *Evaluate the requested land use with the Resource Management Plan*

***Comments and questions in regard to Desert Tortoise Habitat Management:***

- *When was the last Desert Tortoise inventory of the Table Mesa area?*
- *How many burrows in study area?*
- *Have any Desert Tortoises been found?*
- *What about the eagles nesting on the lake?*
- *Desert Tortoise upper respiratory problems are not part of nature.*

*Tim replied that domestic and exotic tortoises were most likely purchased by folks as pets and then released to the wild. They became carriers and created problems for the desert tortoise. Desert Tortoise upper respiratory problems look like nasal discharge and enlarged glands.*

- *Users to the area can't cause this.*

*Tim stated that is not so, users add "stress" to the Desert Tortoise populations making them susceptible to the upper respiratory infection. The biggest concern to Desert Tortoise is habitat fragmentation by roads and pipelines.*

- *A Desert Tortoise uses approximately 200 acres.*
- *When can area be inventoried for Desert Tortoise?*
- *With many existing roads, the impact to the Desert Tortoise has likely already been manifested.*
- *OHV users say that they have seen only one Desert Tortoise in 11 years.*

*Tim stated that the tortoise comes out of burrows very early/late. Most people do not see them and many more do not know what to look for. He said that areas with recent usage or disturbance can be restored for the Desert Tortoise. BLM will make its best effort to mitigate Desert Tortoise impacts. Signs of the Desert Tortoise include; scat, egg shells, and burrows and boulders.*

*Tim stated that the last Desert Tortoise inventory done in the Table Mesa Area was, specifically, where rock crawling organizations made a request to the BLM and in order to evaluate the request, the specific area was surveyed. In 2005, Desert Tortoise were found in the area.*

Questions:

- We are now here to figure out how to plan to get around Desert Tortoise areas.
- Is there a way to locate every Desert Tortoise and plan around?

*Tim stated that the BLM Desert Tortoise process needs to find out where the project will be and then we do a site specific study. He stated that Desert Tortoise and riparian closures are not arbitrary decisions.*

- *Mr. Hughes noted that much of southwestern Arizona is a desert tortoise habitat...the issue is whether they are at specific areas, when, what affects them, etc. Therefore, it is difficult to map these areas, as the tortoise does move and must move to accommodate its lifeline and breeding.*

Comments:

- If we do not know where Desert Tortoise areas are, how can we plan?
- Show us the last Desert Tortoise inventory.

*Steve Cohn interjected that again, all concepts on are on the table for right now and what the agency has been asking is for individuals and groups to bring these specific ideas and locations (maps) to the table and make the most compelling case for the land use and compatibility. "We're now asking, "what other proposals are there?"*

Several participants indicated that it is difficult to find trails and area when they don't have the data to do our homework. It seems like everywhere in the planning area is Desert Tortoise Habitat. They asked if the entire area has been surveyed and if so, why the map can't be made available for this process.

*Tim stated that the entire area has not been mapped, as he stated, he conducts site specific surveys when a group or company applies for a land use permit or right of way or when the agency develops trails and roads.*

Public Comments:

- When will this process be done?
- This process cannot be done by March.
- Inventory of Desert Tortoise habitat has very little overlap with existing roads.
- We have been looking at how to connect existing roads.
- We need a trail that parallels the Agua Fria River then cuts across.

- We all want to see Desert Tortoise habitat areas highlighted on the map.

*Tom Bickauskas stated that it could take about one month to inventory new proposed trails, and Tim Hughes added that it takes a few days to inventory those trails for Desert Tortoise. However, Tim added that he doesn't have the resources to inventory every inch of the planning area. He again clarified that the process for BLM is for someone to propose a route, and then he goes out to inventory Desert Tortoise and makes a recommendation regarding the proposed trail.*

Public Comments:

- We cannot find a new route because of Desert Tortoise and other issues that need to be worked around.
- Our homework was to propose new crawling trails. But, we cannot because we do not know where Desert Tortoise habitat is.
- A volunteer Desert Tortoise survey would be too labor intensive.
- A Desert Tortoise survey volunteer would need to be trained first.

*Tim Hughes stated that Desert Tortoise areas need to be connected.*

*The audience asked questions about a recent pipeline installation in the area. The pipeline firm had to survey for tortoises by contracted biologists. The pipeline project could not be mitigated. The pipeline project paid approximately \$250,000 for Desert Tortoise habitat compensation which is being used to restore or conserve desert tortoise habitat.*

Public Comments:

- What should I do if I see a Desert Tortoise on the road?

*Tim replied that you can carefully move the Desert Tortoise off the road, but keep the Desert Tortoise level while moving.*

- I fear closure decisions are being based upon inaccurate, incomplete and fuzzy science.
- Once a road is closed we cannot go back.
- How can you say roads fragment Desert Tortoise habitat when you do not have the science to back it?
- We want scientific facts to back the closing of a road.
- I do not want someone in an office to make road closure decisions.
- We are concerned that the project team is going over past studies that took years to complete.
- Routes BLM is now proposing to close and open decided without decision making matrix.

*Tom Bickauskas stated that Appendix D of the Resource Management Plan addresses this issue. In many cases, the routes or roads were never open or designated roads; some can appear very quickly as riders create them. His goal is to connect roads for an longer, enjoyable ride while protecting the resources, as mandated.*

#### Public Comments:

- Your guy mapped and walked the area, is there a map of where Desert Tortoise sign is found in the area?
- Is a map of where Desert Tortoise sign is found in the area available to us?
- Previous Desert Tortoise survey maps were before GIS and are located on paper topos.
- Other than a few sites in the past months BLM has made no Desert Tortoise survey efforts.
- Desert Tortoise is a long lived animal so the Desert Tortoise inventoried in past should still be there.

*Steve Cohn stated that the Desert Tortoise habitat inventory will be included in the Environmental Assessment (EA). BLM looks for Desert Tortoise sign in response to projects. The BLM wildlife biologist needs alternate routes to do target surveys. In other words – bring all of your concept an maps to the table, we'll map them, we'll review them, we'll create a plan and at that time, the plan goes into an environmental assessment (EA) – this is when the biologists goes out and make the recommendations.*

#### **Reviewing the Plan Components**

*Teresa Makinen asked Tom Bickauskas to once again review the plan components. Tom pointed out areas of change, open and closed roads, riparian areas, new trail connections, identified safe shooting areas and other areas that, with mitigation, could be made safe. Tom noted there may be several of the land use management issues behind a suggested closure – river banks, riparian areas, the Desert Tortoise mitigation and others for safe shooting. For safe shooting, six larger sites are proposed (as opposed to dozens of smaller ones scattered in riverbeds) that will accommodate up to 40 shooters for both long and short range targeting. A southern shooting area was included for shooting experience that includes 4x4 trails. In the northern area of the area, development is concentrated around the roads system. Target shooters told use they want to drive to the sites and prefer them accessible. There were five (5) larger shooting areas surveyed by the Az. Game & Fish folks and this increased this week to six (6). The small red dots are the site in river or riparian banks / tortoise areas, or where hikers pass by that are proposed closed. Anything in red denotes a proposed closed by road access. However, as long as the shooter walks at least 200 feet out of any roads, shooting would be allowed at other locations where they are 200ft from an open route and meet the requirements for safe shooting listed in the RMP.*

*Tom also went over the addition of proposed facilities including entry kiosks, improved Black Canyon Trailhead, improved campsites, improved staging areas with a Tot Lot.*

***Comments and questions in regard to the Proposed Plan Components:***

- Who would I call to develop a shooting site partnership?
- What is the number of shooting injuries in the area?
- Why the concern about shooting?
- In many places the existing trails can be sited from the existing shooting areas.
- Why are you closing shooting areas out of safety concerns when there are no safety issues?
- My boat is shot up.
- There have been many reports of near misses.
- The need for safe shooting is real and with this effort BLM is trying to get out ahead of the issue.
- You cannot get ahead of "stupid people."
- Is the kiosk informational only?
- Including a bunny hill for the kids is a great idea.
- Who would I donate paper target to for the shooting areas?
- How do I find out why a proposed closure is happening?
- I question spending on informational kiosks without law enforcement.
- Who will cover liability for the bunny hill?

*Tom Bickauskas stated that there is a route inventory available; however, it would be easier if you would say which route you are interested in.*

- We need each line explained on map.
- We are putting these lines on the map to see if you agree or not.
- The Agua Fria River is a sandy wash most of the year. Cannot a portion of this sandy area be designated for sand running part of the year?

*Tim Hughes stated that sand running in the Agua Fria River is a riparian issue involving plant community health and the stabilization of banks that help slow the flow of the river when it does flow. There is probably some area we can look at for sand running. A riparian area is dynamic – it's always changing.*

*Steve Cohn stated that it's the kind of people in this room that are the ones to help patrol the area with issues such as dust, law enforcement and trail blazing. We want to work with the community for ongoing issues in the area. This is your public land – we all have the responsibility.*

**Public Comments:**

- Is there a proposal in place to look for additional Lake Pleasant access?
- A public access to the park boundary is needed.

*Steve Cohn stated that BLM is working with the Maricopa County Parks who have that jurisdiction. In fact, there is a public meeting tomorrow night for the Agua Fria Conservation Area, which is what that area is called for the lake access off Table Mesa Road.*

Public Comments:

- The land is completely open now and you are going to close it without any applicable reasons to justify.
- BLM has not justified the timeline for the Table Mesa recreational Plan nor the "there might be Desert Tortoise there" justification.
- We are losing too many shooting opportunities.
- If someone is shooting unsafely, you can bring law enforcement out.
- You cannot close public land because of unsafe shooters.
- Will there be a penalty if I shoot in the wrong place?
- The Table Mesa Recreation Plan is not a 7 week process.

*Steve Cohn stated that after the proposed plan is finalized and accepted by the BLM, there will be the need for an environmental assessment (EA). Typically, an agency holds only one public meeting. In this case – there were two public meetings (November) followed by these Core Strategy Sessions. We wanted to open the process up to include as much public comment as possible. With these meetings, BLM gets a sense of what the public wants and the public gets a sense of what BLM does.*

- Why not move the Table Mesa Recreation Plan March 31, 2009 plan deadline to August 31, 2009?

*Steve Cohn stated that the Resource Management Plan covers 1 million acres while the Table Mesa Recreational Plan area includes 11,000 acres of the 1 million. If we spend 2-3 years on the Table Mesa Recreation Plan, we cannot get to the rest of the one million acres to plan.*

Public Comments:

- Put law enforcement where shooting is happening next to people riding.
- Idiots shoot without a backstop.
- BLM is trying to close land because of a lack of law enforcement.

*Steve Cohn stated that to actually "implement" is the wrong word for the March 31<sup>st</sup> deadline because the Table Mesa Recreation Plan must be followed by an environmental assessment (EA). The EA process will take place approximately 2-3 months after this planning process. After the March 31<sup>st</sup> date, there will be BLM internal work to be completed. Then there is another period for public comments. BLM is trying to get as many of these comments up front as possible, and then if people*

*don't like what they see with the EA, they can appeal the EA. The Table Mesa Recreation Plan process is an informal process.*

Public Comments:

- Is any work in the area now being done by anyone, because I see work in the area.

*Steve Cohn stated that APS is doing powerline maintenance, which they are required to do under FERC guidelines.*

- Why is there a campground so close to a riparian area?

*Steve stated that camping is allowed 100 feet off of roads and in some cases, the area has already been impacted by past mining activities.*

- There is a basic multi-user problem: We cannot find out who has law enforcement jurisdiction in area.
- When law enforcement does have jurisdiction why are they not enforcing in the area? Who are we supposed to call?

*Steve Cohn stated that if someone shoots at you, call 911. If you're assaulted, call 911. Emergencies – call 911. If you see illegal activities that relate to federal lands and resources (littering, harming the lands), you can get a picture of the license plate to the BLM.*

*The proposed closed trails each has a story as to why it needs to be closed.*

- Why can't 4x4 people use the existing roads?

*Steve Cohn stated that there is a risk of route proliferation, but we want the route system to accommodate what people want to do. You can camp 100 feet off the road.*

- ATV'ers follow the road to see where it goes.
- The public does not use roads to get from A to B only.
- BLM has gone overboard on road closures.
- Who enforces dust control in Area A on high dust days?

*Steve Cohn stated that access across private land can't be shown on the map, but private land could be purchased. At this time, BLM is working with one private property owner trying to get deeded access if other options cannot be found. But, BLM can't encourage people to trespass.*

*He went on to say that BLM has the authority to run through a thorough analysis of safe places to shoot. We are looking for funding partners. We don't plan to close roads/river-areas to shooting until we have the ability to develop the safe shooting areas, and we are looking for additional safe shooting areas. A proposed shooting area will have minimal development, berms, benches and target gongs. Currently, much of the shooting is taking place in washes above Phoenix's main water supply. With storm events there is the chance to wash lead into that supply. To identify safe, sustainable shooting areas BLM looked at sites with natural backstops.*

#### Public Comments:

- Any road in the area for more than 5 years should be kept.
- I do not like benches at shooting sites.
- Use PVC pipe to delineate lanes.
- There needs to be some way to enforce trash pickup.
- Someone should patrol the area at night.
- Much of the illegal activities are happening at night.

#### *Participant Proposals on Alternatives*

*Teresa then asked the participants for any proposals they may have on alternatives for the area. Several individuals came to the front of the group to explain their proposed alternative and annotated it on the map.*

#### *Closing Comments*

*Teresa invited all to the same place at the same time in 2 weeks (Feb. 17<sup>th</sup>: same time/same place) for the next meeting to continue to provide more maps and concepts and specific locations for uses and to continue this discussion on the Table Mesa Recreational Plan. Teresa asked that the same people attend the next meeting.*

*Steve Cohn thanked all for their time and for sharing their ideas. He stated that the Table Mesa Recreation Area could be a world class recreational area - this area is special.*