



METRO/STATE

Agreement reached on tortoises

Plan to move reptiles paves way for builders

By Mary Manning

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All levels of government have signed a historic agreement as a first step in efforts to save the threatened Mojave Desert tortoise and avert a threatened building moratorium in Southern Nevada.

At the same time Monday, the Nature Conservancy announced the signing of an option to buy the 159,000-acre Myers Ranch near Searchlight from owner Sharky Myers as a potential tortoise area.

If the deal closes Sept. 3, certain developers can build again under the short-term tortoise habitat conservation plan. They would pay \$550 for each acre they develop and the money would be used to help protect the tortoise preservation area, a home for an expected 3,500 of the reptiles.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved the short-term permit allowing development on 22,352 acres in Las Vegas Valley. Federal, state and local

governments plus citizens and experts worked on the plan for two years.

In exchange, at least 400,000 acres of tortoise habitat will be preserved in outlying areas of Clark County, away from the urban boom in Las Vegas and nearby communities.

The Nature Conservancy also has an option to buy parts of the Walking Box Ranch in the same Piute Valley as the Myers Ranch. The Walking Box Ranch once belonged to movie star Clara Bow.

Clark County hired Southern California attorney and endangered species veteran Paul Selzer to bring warring sides to agreement.

"Rather than scream and holler and say how bad it was, you rolled up your sleeves and did something about it," Selzer told a room packed with everyone from environmentalists to multi-use land proponents.

"You've demonstrated to the entire country this process can work," Selzer said.

Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., who was born and raised in Searchlight, recalled the time Sharky's brother, Carl, rescued the senator's father after a fiery mine shaft explosion.

"I know it's a good settlement, because everybody's unhappy," Reid said, referring to the short-term solution to saving tortoises.

Lt. Gov. Sue Wagner said the tortoise conservation plan proves growth does not have to sacrifice the environment.

"By preserving the desert tortoise and allowing for orderly development, the case can be made that strong economic growth need not result in a declining quality of life for the citizens of Southern Nevada," Wagner said.

Sen. Richard Bryan, D-Nev., feared Las Vegas growth could be strangled for decades in wrangling over the attempt to save the tortoise.

"This will not be the first nor the last of the public policy issues that will be contentious ... but it augers well for the future," Bryan said.

Clark County Commission Chairman Jay Bingham and

Commissioner Thalia Dondero hailed the agreement as a solution involving every facet of government.

Ultimately, if tortoises thrive on preserved lands, they could be removed from the threatened species listing, said Marvin Plenert, Pacific Regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

However, the public will not be allowed to drop unwanted tortoises onto the habitat. Tortoises born in captivity may have spread an upper respiratory disease into wild kin, said Ben Collins, Las Vegas District director of the Bureau of Land Management.

An adoption program for tortoises has been established through the Tort Group, said Betty Burge, its founder.

The BLM has carved a 610-acre site southwest of Las Vegas on federal land to study habits of normal tortoises and those discovered with the upper respiratory diseases. About 15 percent of the reptiles taken from 12 building sites to the BLM center had the disease.