

## Ten Tortoise Reasons to Stop LADWP Power Lines

When people think of our Preserve, they most often think “birds,” but the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve ACEC (Area of Critical Environmental Concern) is also home to a very special nonbird species that happens to be a reptile—the desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*). The desert tortoise, rather a symbol for the Mojave Desert, inhabits the drier, more typically desert parts of the ACEC, which turns out to be a lot of territory when you consider that the ACEC extends all the way to the border of Joshua Tree National Park.

We chose to focus on the tortoise at this time because of the looming threat posed by the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power’s Green Path North (GPN) project, an attempt to run a huge corridor of 500 kV high-transmission power lines through the Morongo Basin. LADWP’s right-of-way application to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has this massive new energy corridor running right through the heart of the BMCP ACEC.

The desert tortoise, this cute little walking tank on four legs, is a federal- and state-listed threatened species under the Endangered Species Acts and is the California state reptile. It deserves our attention. So here goes with our Ten Tortoise Reasons to Stop LADWP Power Lines:

**1. GPN Right-of-Way = 10 Tortoise Miles Wide.** Scientists have shown that even small roads (and GPN is definitely not small) have a major adverse affect on tortoises for 5 miles on either side of the road.

**2. Power Poles = Raven Perches and Nest Sites.** Yep, those highly intelligent ravens know a good thing when they see it,

and for this tortoise predator, a 200-foot-tall power pole provides a perfect nesting spot and viewpoint to spot those tasty little tortoise juveniles. Until tortoises are five to seven years old, their shell remains soft enough to be punctured by a ravenous raven. Raven predation is a major threat to tortoises. One study reported finding 250 shells, probably killed over a four-year period, dead beneath one raven nest alone.

**3. Your OHV Just Crushed My OHB (off-highway burrow).** Power line corridors



This desert tortoise cannot speak for himself and needs our help to protect him from massive new power lines LADWP plans to run through BMCP

open up areas to extensive illegal off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, leading to crushed tortoise burrows and crushed tortoises. A tortoise spends 98% of its life underground and is above ground only 153 hours per year. Tortoises have been found crushed in burrows that were collapsed by OHVs. Talk about crushing, how many tortoises could several-ton erection cranes, ready-mix trucks, tractor-trailer big rigs, etc., etc. crush during construction of a new power line?

**4. Territory—A Resident Power Pole Now Has Mine.** LADWP states that close to one acre will be cleared for each GPN power pole, with the existing vegetation on this acre crushed (and the soil completely compacted). This, along with the 24-foot-wide roadways to be constructed, would permanently remove a whole lot of territory from habitation by tortoises.

**5. Introduced Weeds = Tortoise Junk Food.** Nonnative, invasive grasses are opportunists that invade the desert wherever man makes roads and travels, and they really like disturbed soil. GPN would open up pristine areas to tons of exotic grasses, providing tortoises with a low-quality diet to replace the high-quality nutrition of native forbs.

**6. Look at Me; I’m So Cute.** Human instinct is to want to pick up, and in some cases remove, tortoises. New GPN access roads will open up tortoise territory to increased human-tortoise interactions. Even innocent human actions, such as picking up a tortoise, can be deadly for this water-conserving creature, as handled tortoises tend to void their bladder, losing critical fluids. And, not all human interaction is as innocent, as access roads have led to purposeful killing of tortoises, including running over, chopping off heads, and numerous gunshot mortalities.

**7. Achoo! – More Than Just the Sniffles.** A runny nose is often the sign of potentially fatal upper respiratory tract disease (URTD) in tortoises.

Tortoises in wild, remote areas are generally free of URTD, but where tortoise populations come in contact with humans, the disease can spread. People drop off infected pet tortoises using access roads into territory they think will be appropriate for their ex-pet, thus introducing URTD to wild populations.

**8. Nowhere to Hide (from fire).** Power lines create a risk of more wildfires, which are deadly to tortoises. During a wildfire, both in and out of burrows, tortoises are burned or inhale lethal amounts of smoke.

**9. What did you say? crackle, crackle, crackle.** Tortoises actually communicate verbally, and their hearing is sensitive. They make all sorts of pop, whistle, and eek noises that are part of their social behavior.

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Okay, the crackle of power lines may not be loud enough to disturb tortoises (unlike humans, they don't know that the EMF associated with the crackle is a threat to their health). However, the blasting and other loud noises associated with power line construction and the subsequent roar of OHVs can damage tortoise hearing.

10. **No Going Back - Revegetation is Mission Impossible.** LADWP admits that revegetation would be difficult along the 85-mile GPN route, and the utility has no plan as to how this could be accomplished. Previous efforts by the BLM to revegetate illegal roads within the BMCP ACEC were a total failure, with absolutely no plants surviving. Once this important tortoise habitat is destroyed, that's it, it's gone forever.

Each of these ten power line-imposed threats is serious enough in itself, but the cumulative impact of all these effects is worse yet for the desert tortoise. The California Desert Coalition has organized to defeat these unnecessary power lines. Please visit their website at [www.cadesertco.org](http://www.cadesertco.org) and get involved. You can help protect our beloved desert tortoise and all the other Preserve wildlife that would be affected by LADWP GPN power lines.

## PLEASE HELP PROTECT OUR TORTOISES & WILDLIFE

Most of the information on which our article about threats to the desert tortoise is based can be found summarized in the 2002 report *Threats to Desert Tortoise Populations: A Critical Review of the Literature*, prepared by the USGS specifically for the BLM West Mojave Planning Team.

Please write to the BLM requesting that the agency deny LADWP's request for the Green Path North power line route through the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve ACEC. Let the agency know your concern for our tortoises and other wildlife. Write to:

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