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Desert tortoise slowing pace of interchange, overpass building

By John Gallant
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The Mojave desert tortoise continues to set the pace for the construction of interchanges and overpasses along U.S. Highway 95 in northwest Las Vegas and the pace is, as expected, tortoise-like.

Start of construction on the deadly stretch of U.S. 95 north of Rainbow Boulevard has been delayed a month while the Nevada Department of Transportation obtained needed federal and state permits.

Work should finally begin next week, but the contractors and state officials will have to comply with 30 pages of rules and guidelines for handling any tortoises that wander

onto the construction sites, a Nevada Department of Transportation official said Tuesday.

No tortoises or burrows have been found in the areas where interchanges will be constructed at Cheyenne Avenue and Craig Road and overpasses at Alexander Road and Vegas Drive. If one should wander onto the construction site, however, construction will have to stop or move to another area, said district construction engineer George Muschato.

Also, one of about 100 specially trained Department of Transportation employees will have to be summoned to move the tortoise. Part of the delay, he said, was in

training the state employees and construction crews in what to do if the tortoise is found.

"The rules are pretty specific. We can pick up the tortoise and relocate him to a place no greater than 100 feet from the right of way and must place him down gently in the shade, if possible," Muschato explained.

And if the tortoise wanders back onto the site?

"We hope we point him in the right direction and he moves on," said Muschato.

It doesn't end there, however. Each time state employees move a tortoise they must file a "tortoise relocation incident report" with the Department of the Interior.

Monthly reports and an annual report are also required, Muschato said.

"It's really quite a mess now," he said.

Despite all the rules, Muschato doesn't believe the tortoise will cause any major delays this fall. Most tortoises have moved on because of the residential construction. Also, the tortoises begin their hibernation in a month and construction should proceed without delay throughout the winter, he said.

But the problems may resurface along with the tortoises when hibernation ends in the spring, Muschato acknowledged.

The overpasses and interchanges

are the first phase of a \$16 million effort to convert U.S. 95 into a full-fledged highway, replacing the dangerous stop sign-controlled entrances to the freeway. Construction is expected to be completed in two years.

Work was to have begun Sept. 1, but designation of the desert tortoise as an endangered species put public and private projects on hold. The U.S. 95 project was able to proceed only after the state Department of Transportation obtained three permits from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

Department officials predicted two weeks ago they would receive the contracts and would begin construction immediately, but it took longer than expected to finalize the permits, Muschato said.

Three other highway projects in southern Nevada are on indefinite hold until the state can produce a permanent habitat protection plan for the tortoise, Muschato said.

The U.S. 95 improvements were able to proceed under a temporary, one-year permit because of the nature of its funding, Muschato said. The other three projects, near Jean, Mesquite and Laughlin, rely heavily on U.S. Highway Department funding and follow different rules, he said.

That permanent plan should be finalized in the next one to two months, he said.