Plenty spent on endangered species list's tortoise

By MIKE STARK, Associated Press Writer – Tue Jan 20, 5:07 am ET

 AP – In this Wednesday, Sept. 3, 2008 file photo, an endangered desert tortoise sits in the middle of a road …

SALT LAKE CITY – Leathery, shy and a bit world-weary, the Mojave desert tortoise doesn't come across as a high-roller.

But among land-going critters on the endangered species list, it's among the top recipients of money spent by state and federal agencies trying to keep it from the brink of extinction, according to an Associated Press analysis of the last 11 years of available data.

From 1996 to 2006, more than $93 million was spent on managing the long-lived reptile, records show. That's more than was spent on other species such as the grizzly bear, gray wolf or bald eagle.

Not bad for a pokey desert dweller that spends most of its time in underground burrows in parts of Utah, California, Arizona and Nevada.

Not that preserving the tortoise is simple.

The tortoise's "critical habitat" stretches across 9,600 square miles. Jurisdictions include four states, seven military installations, four national parks and scores of federal, state and county agencies.

Add to that a long list of threats, from highways, urbanization and wildfires to disease, off-road vehicles and climate change.

"We don't have a good silver bullet for the tortoise," said Roy Averill-Murray, desert tortoise recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Reno, Nev.

Congress in 1988 added a section to the Endangered Species Act requiring an annual species-by-species expenditure report. Before then, no one knew how much was being spent to save plants and animals on the list, said Valerie Fellows, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The reports are an attempt to calculate how much states and 31 federal agencies — from the Coast Guard to the Federal Highway Administration — are forking over for threatened and endangered species.

By far the top recipients have been salmon in the Pacific Northwest and the Steller sea lion. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on those species since reporting began in 1996.

The 2006 report, the latest released by the Fish and Wildlife Service, estimates that $884 million was spent on more than 1,100 species on the list.

There's a wide disparity in how money is doled out. The pallid sturgeon, a prehistoric-looking freshwater fish, topped the 2006 list with $39 million. A rare herb in Utah called the Barneby reed-mustard got just $6.

About $10.5 million was spent on the desert tortoise. Spending in 2007 was more than $11 million, according to a draft report.

"Nobody thought it was going to be an inexpensive proposition," said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group. "But the desert tortoise is a bellwether for the health of our deserts."

Tortoises in southwest Utah were listed as threatened in 1980. That designation was expanded to Mojave tortoises in the rest of their range in 1990.

Since then, millions have been spent on monitoring, fences to keep them from wandering onto highways, studies on a respiratory disease and stacks of long-range plans intended to make sure the tortoise survives.

One of the most ambitious plans was to relocate 770 of the reptiles to Bureau of Land Management land to make way for the expansion of Fort Irwin, a national military training center near Barstow, Calif.

The move started in March but was put on hold in October after about 90 tortoises died — most killed and eaten by coyotes.

Averill-Murray estimates there are 111,000 to 187,000 adult desert tortoises in areas designated as critical habitat.

Getting them off the endangered species list means populations must increase or remain stable for at least 25 years.

But it's unclear whether progress has been made. In fact, many populations have declined dramatically.

The federal government is in the midst of revising its recovery plan. A final draft is expected later this year.

Averill-Murray said the tortoises' peculiar nature — secretive and slow to breed — means there's a lag in seeing results from all the effort to keep them from disappearing.

"We really haven't given the tortoise enough time to know whether we've done any good or not," he said.