

**Report to the Commission:
Gopher Tortoise Management Plan
Annual Update (August 2008)**

In September 2007 when the FWC Commission approved the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan, staff were directed to provide an annual update on the progress made in reaching the plan's goal: to restore and maintain secure, viable populations of gopher tortoises throughout the species' current range in Florida. The plan's four conservation objectives include habitat management, habitat preservation, restocking gopher tortoises, and decreasing gopher tortoise mortality on development sites. Each objective provides benchmarks and measurements against which progress toward the plan's goal can be assessed. The objectives will be met through the implementation of the extensive series of conservation actions outlined in the plan which fall under the following broad categories: regulations, permitting, local government coordination, law enforcement, habitat preservation and management, population and disease management, landowner incentives, monitoring and research, and education and outreach. This report provides an update on progress and current efforts made by FWC staff who is working to ensure that the plan's goal is achieved.

Implementation of the gopher tortoise management plan started immediately following the plan's approval in September of last year. A gopher tortoise management plan coordinator was hired in November. The major implementation item in the plan for Year 1 was the development of the new permitting guidelines and related permits. The implementation of the various types of permits is being staggered and we are on track to launch the entire permit system described in the plan by late Spring of 2009. FWC staff, with considerable input from a group of stakeholders that we call the Gopher Tortoise Technical Advisory Group (GTTAG), drafted the revised Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines which the Commission approved in April. These guidelines, now being implemented, include information for capturing, handling, health considerations, and transporting gopher tortoises during relocation activities.

The FWC's gopher tortoise 2 (GT2) staff team that created the management plan disbanded following the approval of the permitting guidelines and the gopher tortoise 3 (GT3) staff team was convened to take on the role of overseeing management plan implementation. The GT3 team members have developed a system to track and monitor the progress made in implementing the management plan. They have established a monthly meeting schedule to ensure that we are on track to meet the plan objectives through the implementation of the conservation actions identified in the plan.

At the April Commission meeting, FWC's Executive Director signed the first Recipient Site permit to Plum Creek Timber which allows Plum Creek to accept gopher tortoises from development sites under the new permitting guidelines. Also at the April Commission meeting, staff proposed that Recipient Site and Authorized Gopher Tortoise Agent permits would be available on June 1, 2008. On June 1, the new Recipient Site permit was implemented. However, the target date for implementation of the Authorized Agent permit was delayed because of the need to further clarify the required qualifications for authorized agents and evaluative criteria for training entities. The FWC's GT3 team has been addressing this and revisions to the permitting guidelines since June. The team continues to work with the GTTAG stakeholder group to ensure that concerns and issues are addressed and revised as appropriate. One such issue that has recently come to the attention of the staff is potential conflicts with horses and gopher tortoise burrows. The GT3 team members have drafted a guidance document and solicited input from the GTTAG and plan to have a final protocol for addressing these potential issues in the coming months.

In the weeks following the approval of the Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines, FWC convened a staff project team to provide input and assistance with the development of the future gopher tortoise online permitting system. Since April, team members have been working diligently to ensure the online system's implementation timeframe is met. The team is currently in the process of selecting the contractor who will develop the online system that is expected to be launched in Spring 2009. At the time the online system is launched, all permits in the approved Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines will be implemented and required.

In addition to working on the new permitting guidelines, FWC staff have been able to implement a number of the Plan's other conservation actions to help achieve the management plan objectives. First and foremost, the Legislative Budget Request for FY 08/09 was approved, which will ensure that the appropriate staffing and resources are available to help implement activities identified in the plan.

Staff continues to coordinate externally and internally with the American Forest Foundation, FWC's Landowner Assistance Program, and Florida Division of Forestry to provide outreach presentations to private landowners to encourage new recipient sites. Ongoing internal coordination with FWC technical assistance staff focuses on increasing the acreage of tortoise habitat managed on private lands through various landowner incentive opportunities. A "Fact Sheet" for landowners on becoming a recipient site is in development which will be added to FWC's knowledge

base and distributed to agency staff. Additional workshops are scheduled where presentations on opportunities for private landowners to participate as gopher tortoise recipient sites will be highlighted. Furthermore, an article focusing on opportunities for private landowners as gopher tortoise recipient sites was published in the Spring/Summer 2008 edition of the Florida Forestry Association's publication, *Florida Forests*.

The FWC is currently implementing research projects that will provide information on soft release methods and stocking densities for relocated tortoises. In addition, research is being initiated to examine genetic issues in tortoises located in the Panhandle region of Florida. Staff has begun and is continuing to coordinate restocking efforts with other public lands' managers at the Florida Park Service, Florida Division of Forestry, Water Management Districts, and at Eglin Air Force Base. Discussions have begun on developing a fire strike team to assist public land managers with burning since prescribed fire is a key tool for the proper management of gopher tortoise habitat.

The FWC's Geographic Information System (GIS) staff has been working to create maps of existing gopher tortoise donor and recipient sites. In the upcoming months they will be conducting a statewide habitat assessment to determine the acreages of potential tortoise habitat. These mapping tools will help us identify areas that may require directed habitat management and areas we may want to try and acquire for gopher tortoise conservation through conservation easements, land purchases, etc. A prescribed fire database has been developed, and other future database development includes a management needs database, management treatment database, vegetation monitoring database, along with enhanced databases to track permits. An additional staff person is being hired to work across divisions to help coordinate data management, identify future data needs, and database development efforts.

A FWC law enforcement training manual about gopher tortoises is under development. This manual will be used to train law enforcement officers in the field and recruits in the academy on regulations and guidelines for addressing wildlife complaints related to gopher tortoises. Training on rules, law enforcement protocols, gopher tortoise natural history, permitting guidelines, and pertinent definitions for gopher tortoises (along with other species) for law enforcement personnel will continue during the coming year.

Current efforts to improve coordination with local governments in Florida include dissemination of the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan and revised permitting guidelines through the Florida Association of Counties. A staff person is being hired to serve as a liaison with state and local

governments to assist them with implementing the management plan. Some of the activities this individual will be responsible for are conducting regional workshops for state and local government agencies and law enforcement entities. They will also help coordinate with local governments on establishing recipient sites, including off-site relocations for less than ten tortoises. This person will serve as a FWC point of contact for other agencies on implementing the management plan. They will also help distribute brochures and educational materials that are currently under development and provide other assistance as needed.

The FWC staff continues to coordinate and work with the Gopher Tortoise Technical Advisory Group (GTTAG) ad hoc subgroups on all activities regarding implementation of the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan and permitting guidelines. The ad hoc groups are working closely with members of the GT3 team on: the certification and training of authorized gopher tortoise agents; permitting guidelines' revisions and future online permitting system; coordination on activities related to local government outreach; addressing the different relocation needs of other species that live in gopher tortoise burrows (called commensals); long-term monitoring of recipient sites; education materials and pamphlets; and, with various research activities. The continued interest and participation of the GTTAG members in gopher tortoise management plan implementation is important to the long-term conservation of the gopher tortoise.

Implementation of the gopher tortoise management plan is on schedule and staff is pleased with the progress being made.