



Frequently Asked Questions

Gopher tortoise revised management plan

What is a gopher tortoise?

A gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a moderate-sized, land turtle that lives in an underground burrow. Adults average 9-11 inches long, but gopher tortoises may grow to 15 inches. They prefer high, dry, sandy places in Florida, such as longleaf pine sandhills, scrub, pine flatwoods, dry prairies, and coastal dunes.



How are gopher tortoises doing?

Although found in all 67 Florida counties, gopher tortoise numbers are declining. Estimates indicate a decline of about 60-80 percent in the last century, generally due to reduced habitat from increasing development.

Are gopher tortoises protected in Florida?

Yes. It is illegal to kill, harass, injure, possess, transport, relocate, or sell gopher tortoises or their eggs, or destroy their burrows, without a permit from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Gopher tortoises have been listed in Florida as a species of special concern since 1979, a change from classification as threatened in 1975. They will be reclassified as threatened again when FWC commissioners approve a management plan to guide tortoise recovery.

Why wait for a management plan before reclassifying the gopher tortoise?

The process for reclassifying imperiled species requires FWC first develop a management plan for the species. This plan establishes steps necessary for the species' recovery and protection, and outlines how the recommended actions will be implemented. In June 2006, FWC Commissioners agreed the Gopher Tortoise should be reclassified as a threatened species, meaning it has a very high risk of extinction. FWC staff, with regular input from stakeholders and public, has been developing a management plan since the decision to reclassify.

What is the goal of the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan?

The goal is to restore and maintain secure, viable populations throughout the species' current range in Florida. The management plan will provide direction concerning permitting, law enforcement, research, habitat protection and habitat management.

If gopher tortoises are reclassified, will they receive more protection?

FWC's listing process provides protections for the species based on its needs and is not dependent on listing status. The Gopher Tortoise Management Plan approved by Commissioners will include appropriate protections to ensure gopher tortoise recovery in Florida.

Has the public had an opportunity to provide input on the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan?

Yes. The FWC released the first draft of the gopher tortoise management plan in February 2007 and received comments from more than 2,000 people. FWC staff read and considered each comment and revised the plan appropriately based on the input. In May, the FWC released a second draft of the plan for public comment. Additionally, a public workshop was held on May 24. On June 13, the FWC Commissioners heard additional public comments during their initial review of the plan.



Frequently Asked Questions

Gopher tortoise revised management plan

During this second comment period, 300 people provided written input. Since then, staff has revised the plan, incorporating the input from both the public and Commissioners.

Will there be another opportunity for the public to comment on the plan before it is approved?

The final public hearing for the plan is Sept. 12 at the FWC commission meeting. The meeting begins at 8:30 a.m. at the Hilton Hotel, 333 First St. South, St. Petersburg.

When will the gopher tortoise be reclassified?

If FWC Commissioners approve the final gopher tortoise management plan in September, the gopher tortoise will be reclassified from species of special concern to threatened. Portions of the plan will be implemented immediately; others will be progressively implemented.

In the meantime, what happens to tortoises on development sites?

FWC commissioners approved an interim policy that took effect in late July 2007 and requires relocation of gopher tortoises from development sites. The permitting process outlined in the management plan will be based on habitat acquisition, protection and management, and will require relocation.

What does the gopher tortoise management plan propose to achieve?

The plan proposes to:

- Increase the number of gopher tortoises on protected public and private lands by properly managing upland habitat. Activities such as prescribed burning benefit gopher tortoises by creating open, grassy habitats that are ideal for burrowing and feeding, and also improve conditions for many other species. Such sandy, well-drained lands do exist, but through either neglect or being managed for other purposes (timber for example), do not provide the best opportunity for the maximum number of tortoises.
- By 2022, increase the amount of protected gopher tortoise habitat to 1,955,000 acres by adding 615,000 acres of habitat (annual average of 25,000 in public acquisition and 16,000 acres in private acquisition).
- By 2022, restock 60,000 gopher tortoises (about 4,000 per year) to protected, suitable habitats where gopher tortoises have nearly disappeared. The purpose of this restocking effort is to help ensure long-term survival of the species.
- Decrease gopher tortoise deaths on lands slated for development with a redesigned gopher tortoise permitting system, improved enforcement, and expanded partnerships with local governments by 2010. This includes responsibly and humanely relocating an annual average of 12,000 tortoises per year by 2022 (180,000 over 15 years, in addition to the 60,000 restocked to restore depleted populations) to protected, managed, suitable sites where the tortoises' long-term survival is very likely. It also includes promoting the humane removal of the commensal species (other wildlife inhabitants) found in the tortoise burrows.

Where will the tortoises go and how much will it cost to move them?

The success of the gopher tortoise management plan and the future of the gopher tortoise are dependent upon partnerships for protecting and managing land from both the public and private sectors, and upon responsibility by landowners and developers. Under the new permitting system, the FWC will require a mitigation contribution for all permits to move tortoises, including those which were previously issued at no cost. A new variable scale for mitigation contributions will be based on the overall value of the gopher tortoise conservation action being permitted.



Frequently Asked Questions

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In other words, those who move tortoises to relocation sites that offer the best chance for the future of the gopher tortoise population, i.e., protected, managed habitat, will pay the lowest mitigation contributions. Those who move tortoises to sites that offer little or no long-term conservation value will pay the highest mitigation contribution. The contribution is based on the number of gopher tortoises impacted (simply determined by counting the number of burrows and dividing by two) and will range from \$100 to \$4,000.

How will the FWC use the mitigation contributions?

Under the old permitting system, the mitigation contributions were used to purchase, protect, and manage gopher tortoise habitat forever. Under the new permitting system, mitigation contributions will be used to administer the permitting program and habitat will be acquired, protected, and managed through the state's Florida Forever program, its successor, and other state and local land acquisition programs.

Will there be other costs involved to move tortoises?

The FWC will only receive mitigation contributions. However, owners of relocation parcels or recipient sites may charge to accept tortoises on their lands, and those rates would be set by the landowner. Other costs could include consultant fees for locating, capturing, and moving tortoises. These are set by the private contractors performing the service.