



WILDLIFE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE SPOTLIGHT

GOPHER TORTOISE

In 2022, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its listing decision for the gopher tortoise under the Endangered Species Act. The decision made three determinations:

- 1** Listing the gopher tortoise as threatened or endangered throughout its entire range is not warranted.
- 2** There are different populations of the gopher tortoise that meet the criteria for “Distinct Population Segments.”
- 3** The eastern Distinct Population Segment – which includes Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and most of Alabama – does not require protection. The western Distinct Population Segment in Western Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana will retain its threatened status.

The decision recognizes the important role of private working forests in sustaining the gopher tortoise. Specifically, the decision highlights the importance of collaborative information and data sharing between the USFWS and private working forest owners, facilitated by NAFO's Wildlife Conservation Initiative through NCASI. The service notes:

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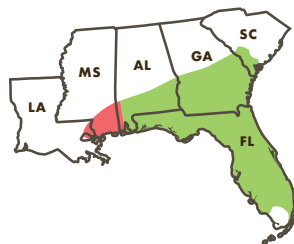
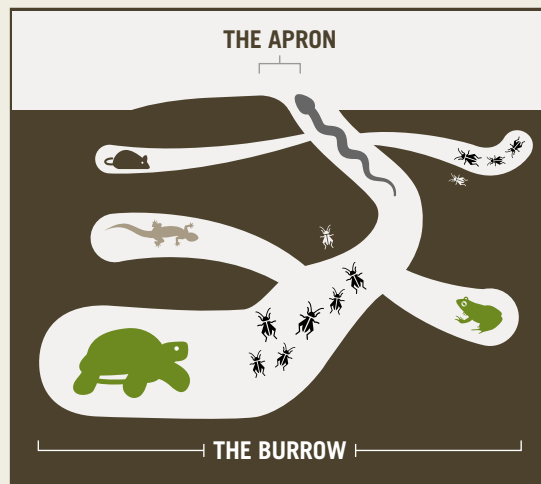
We included the best available data on gopher tortoise observations... observations occur on Member Company lands that are part of the National Council for Air and Stream Improvement and landowners may implement conservation measures including those outlined in the Sustainable Forestry Initiative guidelines. While working to meet a range of objectives, including timber production, many larger private working forests also accomplish conservation within a broad network of collaboration with Federal, State, and local government agencies, universities, and nongovernmental organizations...

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Conserving the gopher tortoise remains a priority for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the NAFO Wildlife Conservation Initiative because of its vital role in our ecosystem. The gopher tortoise is a keystone species, meaning more than 350 other species like snakes, insects, frogs, and even a species of owl depend on their burrows for shelter.

Private forest owners are uniquely positioned to implement conservation measures with the scale that the gopher tortoise needs. How? Active forest management creates the habitat they need to thrive.

The gopher tortoise requires sandy soil, and a diet leafy plants and grasses to eat. Active and sustainable forest management – the continuous cycle of planting, thinning, harvesting, and replanting trees in working forests across the landscape – creates a mosaic of forest ages, ensuring there are always young, healthy pine forests that provide the open canopy required for sunlight to hit the forest floor to grow the gopher tortoise's food.



RANGE MAP

- Federally listed threatened
- Remainder of range

CONSERVATION SUCCESS STARTS WITH KEEPING FORESTS AS FORESTS

We all have a hand in conserving gopher tortoise habitat. When we purchase wood and forest products, we support forest owners and the sustainable cycle of growing, harvesting and replanting that keeps our forests as forests.



This project is made possible by the Wildlife Conservation Initiative (WCI), a collaborative partnership between NAFO, the USFWS, NCASI, and other stakeholders to conserve fish and wildlife species in private working forests. The WCI was founded on the recognition that private working forests are an important conservation tool. NAFO members own and manage more than 43 million acres of private working forests in 32 states — the scale needed to achieve meaningful conservation success. Through the WCI, the proactive and voluntary conservation efforts of government and private working forest owners are delivering positive outcomes for wildlife across the United States.

WildlifeConservationInitiative.org

NAFO
National Alliance
of Forest Owners

GOPHER TORTOISE



PRIVATE FOREST OWNERS PROVIDE CONSERVATION SOLUTIONS FOR THE GOPHER TORTOISE BY:

CONSERVING THE ANIMAL

- Private working forests, where 90+% of the habitat is located, are home to expanding gopher tortoise populations.
- State agencies and private forest owners manage gopher tortoise conservation areas across the range. Several of these sites serve as “banks” for the relocation of individual tortoises displaced by development.
- Foresters work with loggers to mark and protect gopher tortoise burrows. Private forest owners adjust forest management activities to protect active tortoise colonies and burrows.

CONSERVING THE HABITAT

- Active forest management aligns with what the gopher tortoise needs.
- Working forest owners, foresters, and tortoise experts have worked together to develop best management practices for gopher tortoise conservation.
- NAFO member companies’ lands are third party certified as sustainably managed. External audits ensure forest owners are demonstrating both performance and commitment to gopher tortoise conservation.

IMPROVING CONSERVATION THROUGH RESEARCH

- Private forest landowners are dedicated to collaboration, granting access to their lands for population inventory and research.
- Researchers are using telemetry tracking to monitor movement patterns, studying how gopher tortoise populations interact with and respond to human activity.
- Private landowners are providing data for ongoing studies to answer questions regarding minimum viable populations and threats to existing populations.

COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION BRINGS DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS TO THE TABLE

Things you didn't know about the gopher tortoise:

- 1 They get the name “gopher” because the burrows they excavate are similar to gopher burrows – often 15’ long, but some are up to 30’ long and 10’ deep. Burrows offer protection from predators and moderate their body temperatures.
- 2 Illegal human predation and collection is one of the greatest threats to the gopher tortoise.
- 3 Gopher tortoises are the only land tortoises east of the Mississippi River.
- 4 Generally, they don’t drink water. They get all the water they need to survive from the plants they eat.
- 5 Just like sea turtles, they lay their eggs in sand. The temperature of the sand determines the sex of the hatchlings. Warmer sand = female. Cooler sand = male.



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