



Gopher Tortoise

Listing Status: Candidate

**Alabama, Florida,
Georgia, Louisiana,
Mississippi, South Carolina**

Background

Historically, more than 90 million acres of what is now the southeastern United States were covered by longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) savanna; today, only 3.4 million acres remain and most are fragmented and in poor condition. Scattered from Virginia in the north to the Florida peninsula in the south and Texas in the west, longleaf pine forests are some of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems, and provide critical habitat for 29 threatened and endangered species, including the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*).

The gopher tortoise is considered a keystone species, and an indicator of longleaf pine ecosystem health. Gopher tortoise requires deep, well drained soils and an open understory that provides open sunny sites for nesting. Its burrows provide vital habitat and shelter for many endangered species. In addition, gopher tortoise serves as vector for seed dispersal, helping to maintain biological diversity. The effects of habitat destruction, degradation, and human predation have greatly reduced the gopher tortoise population to the point where gopher tortoise is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act throughout the western part of its range.

More than eighty percent of gopher tortoise habitat is in private or corporate ownership. In 2011, NRCS launched the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) to focus technical and financial resources on increasing longleaf pine habitat. Under the initiative, NRCS and its conservation partners are helping private landowners enhance, restore and protect longleaf pine forests. Many of the conservation practices that support longleaf pine forest health also benefit the gopher tortoise, including: forest stand improvement, prescribed burning, restoration and management of rare or declining habitats, and tree/shrub establishment. Working Lands for Wildlife will provide additional resources to support gopher tortoise recovery, and incorporate a species-based indicator of the success of the Longleaf Pine Initiative.

Focal Area Map

Gopher Tortoise



Resource Concern	Total Acres Needing Treatment
Fish and Wildlife Threatened and endangered species, declining species, species of concern	TBD
Plant Condition Noxious and invasive plants	TBD

Goals / Objectives

Working Lands for Wildlife will assist landowners to voluntarily create, restore or enhance gopher tortoise habitat, and increase habitat connectivity which can contribute to the recovery of the tortoise throughout its entire range.

Actions

- Protect, maintain, and restore longleaf pine forests.
- Increase connectivity of existing gopher tortoise habitat.
- Improve weed and invasive species management.
- Promote use of government programs that provide incentives for development or restoration of habitat on private lands.

Outcomes and Impacts

Working Lands for Wildlife will complement the existing Longleaf Pine Initiative by providing targeted funding to help enhance, restore and protect gopher tortoise habitat, and increase landowner confidence that the conservation practices they implement will not harm the species or its habitat.

Additional species benefiting in this focal area are: wild turkey, northern bobwhite, deer, mourning dove, rabbit, and bass.

Core Practices	Supporting Practices	
643 Restoration and Management of Rare and Declining Habitats	314 Brush Management	528 Prescribed Grazing
645 Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	315 Herbaceous Weed Control	550 Range Planting
647 Early Successional Habitat Development and Management	327 Conservation Cover	612 Tree/Shrub Establishment
	338 Prescribed Burning	655 Forest Harvest Trails and Landings
	394 Fire Break	666 Forest Stand Improvement
	422 Hedgerow Planting	
	490 Tree Shrub Site Preparation	
	512 Forage and Biomass Plantings	



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