

Gopher Tortoise Becomes Candidate Species

By Chuck Underwood and R4 External Affairs

Gopher tortoises east of Mobile Bay will be added to the list of candidate species eligible for Endangered Species Act (ESA) protection. While candidate species receive no statutory protection under the ESA, inclusion on the candidate list promotes cooperative conservation efforts for these species.



A gopher tortoise climbs out of its burrow in Baldwin County, Alabama. Photo by Carl Couret.

“After careful review, we have determined the gopher tortoise east of Mobile Bay is facing many of the same problems and challenges as the western population, which is already listed as threatened,” said Cynthia Dohner, Southeast Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “We hope increased protection and conservation efforts in the next few years by private landowners and state and federal agencies in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina can reduce those threats.”

In making this determination, the Service completed a comprehensive review – known as a 12-month finding – and found sufficient scientific and commercial data to propose listing the species as threatened or endangered throughout its range. However, the Service is precluded from beginning work immediately on a listing proposal because its limited resources must be devoted to other, higher priority actions.

The Service can provide technical assistance and competitive matching grants to private landowners, states and territories undertaking conservation efforts on behalf of candidate species. The Service also can work with interested landowners to develop Candidate Conservation Agreements. These

voluntary agreements allow citizens to manage their property in ways that benefit candidate species. These agreements also can be developed to provide regulatory certainty for landowners should the species become listed under the ESA.

The Service made the determination in response to a petition filed on January 25, 2006, to list the gopher tortoise in the eastern portion of its range as threatened under the ESA. The petition was submitted by Mr. Brett Paben, of Wildlaw, on behalf of Save Our Big Scrub, Inc. and Wild South, and included supporting information regarding the potential causes of decline for the gopher tortoise in the eastern United States.

The Service completed an initial review on September 9, 2009, and concluded that the petition contained substantial information supporting a full study of the gopher tortoise’s status.

The eastern portion of the gopher tortoise’s range includes Alabama (east of the Tombigbee and Mobile Rivers), Florida, Georgia, and southern South Carolina. In these areas, the gopher tortoise will become a candidate species for listing under the ESA. In the western range states, west of the Tombigbee River in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, it will continue to be listed as threatened under the ESA.

Threats to the gopher tortoise include habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation, predation, inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms, and incompatible use of herbicides in forest management.

Gopher tortoises need relatively deep, sandy, soils in which to burrow, open sunny sites for nesting and abundant non-woody food plants. Favored foods are beans, broadleaf grasses, and selected plants in the sunflower family. Gopher tortoises also eat blackberries, blueberries, gopher apples, and other low-growing fruits. They thrive in longleaf pine forests, and enjoy the same type of habitat as the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

The gopher tortoise typically inhabits relatively well-drained, sandy soils and is generally associated with longleaf pine-dry oak sandhills, but also occurs in scrub, dry hammock, pine flatwoods, dry prairie, coastal grasslands and dunes, mixed hardwood-pine communities, and a variety of disturbed habitats. Gopher tortoises excavate burrows averaging up to 52 feet long and nine to 23 feet deep. These burrows, which provide protection from temperature extremes and predators, also provide refuge for about 360 other species throughout its range. Some of those species include indigo snakes, gopher frogs, Florida mice, skunks, opossums, rabbits, quail, armadillos, burrowing owls, snakes, lizards, frogs, toads, and many invertebrates.

“The real challenge now is to fine tune on-the-ground management and reach out to more private landowners, who can have a profound impact on recovery for all species in this ecosystem,” Dohner said.”

Gopher tortoises can live to be over 50 years old, but do not reach reproductive age until they are 13 to 21 years old. Although it may seem that there are still a number of gopher tortoises out there, the current generation is aging and suffering lower reproductive success due to degraded habitat conditions. While still relatively common, as older gopher tortoises die, they are not being replaced by young ones.

To achieve the open habitat conditions tortoises prefer, prescribed burns are generally needed every three to five years. In palmetto flatwoods habitat, more frequent burns may be necessary. If burning is not possible to rejuvenate tortoise habitat, regular mowing and brush removal by mechanical means can get help clear out woody shrubs, and thin trees to maintain the natural landscape here in the Southeast that provides a home for the tortoise.

Any future proposal to place the gopher tortoise in the eastern portion of its range on the federal list of threatened and endangered species will include a formal proposed rulemaking process with ample opportunity for public review and comment.