

**ALABAMA TORTOISE ALLIANCE MEETING SUMMARY
DECEMBER 5-6, 2017
ATMORE, ALABAMA**

Participating stakeholders included:

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries	Saloom Properties, LLC
Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division	The Conservation Fund
Alabama Department of Transportation	The Longleaf Alliance
Alabama Forestry Association	The Westervelt Company
Alabama Forestry Commission	U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Alabama Power Company	U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service
Auburn University	U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil and Water Conservation District
Gulf Coast Rural Conservation District	U.S. Department of Defense, Army, Fort Rucker
Nalty Timberlands	U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service
Poarch Band Creek Indians	Weyerhaeuser
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Purpose:

The gopher tortoise is currently a candidate for federal listing in the eastern portion of its range and federally listed as threatened in Mobile, Washington and Choctaw counties. The “candidate” species status is a result of a petition to list the species (2006), and the subsequent 12-month finding published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in July 2011. In 2020, the USFWS is scheduled to begin a Species Status Assessment to determine if the gopher tortoise warrants federal listing in the eastern portion of its range (Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina), followed by the final listing decision in 2023, under the ESA. As a response to the approaching listing decision and potential conservation and economic impacts from such, Alabama stakeholders representing state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, industrial landowners and non-industrial private landowners convened in Atmore, Alabama, in December 2017 to participate in the first Alabama Tortoise Alliance (ALTA) stakeholder meeting.

The purpose of the ALTA is to foster an increased level of communication, collaboration and conservation among the stakeholders to actively manage and conserve gopher tortoise populations and habitat in Alabama so that the species no longer warrants state or federal protection. Conservation and recovery of the gopher tortoise through the implementation of this alliance will require the cooperation of non-industrial private landowners; local governments; state, and federal agencies; non-governmental organizations; and business interests. Although this effort was initiated by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, in collaboration with the above-mentioned stakeholders, it cannot be successfully implemented without significant direct involvement of all Alabama stakeholders. At the first meeting, objectives were meant to inform meeting participants about gopher tortoise conservation efforts in Alabama and are stated below:

- Inform participants of outcomes and activities of the Population Viability Analysis Symposia,
- Solicit input for how to best represent Alabama activities at the gopher tortoise Minimum Viable Population (MVP) meetings,
- Generate an information network and repository for gopher tortoise conservation activities and accomplishments in Alabama, and
- Plan next steps for future tortoise conservation efforts needed to preclude federal listing in Alabama.

Presentation summaries:

- ALTA... Why we are gathered here today.

Ericha Nix, ADCNR, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (DWFF), Nongame Wildlife Program, Gopher Tortoise State Lead, Certified Wildlife Biologist®

ALTA purpose: Observers expect resulting regulations could hamper economic development (Boosting the Gopher Tortoise; USFWS, Aug 2017). Can Alabama stakeholders conserve the gopher tortoise without further federal regulation? Voluntary conservation actions implemented now would provide conservation uplift to the tortoise and other species that rely on the burrow for refuge. If we continue our current path, federal regulation of the gopher tortoise could be in Alabama's future, as soon as 2023. Act now and Alabamians could potentially preclude listing.

ALTA objectives: Inform meeting participants about conservation efforts in Alabama including a) outcomes and activities of the Population Viability Analysis Symposia, b) generate an information network and repository for gopher tortoise conservation activities and accomplishments, c) create a plan on where to go from here.

- Gopher tortoise natural history and biology

Roger Clay, ADCNR, DWFF, Nongame Wildlife Program, Certified Wildlife Biologist®

Reviewed natural history and biology of gopher tortoise.

- Gopher tortoise habitat management

Andrew Nix, ADCNR, DWFF, Registered Forester

Discussed habitat management activities actively taking place on Wildlife Management Areas in the gopher tortoise range. Current habitat management activities are benefiting wild turkey and quail populations as well as gopher tortoises and other open pine associated species.

- Endangered Species Act 101.

Josh Rowell, USFWS, Fish and Wildlife Biologist, AL Gopher Tortoise Lead (Threatened range)

Provided brief overview of the Endangered Species Act, including a discussion of landowner roles to conserve federally listed species. A portion of the talk addressed fears and concerns that landowners sometimes have when listed species occur on their property.

- Origin of key variables in tortoise population viability analysis.

Dr. Craig Guyer, Auburn University, Professor Emeritus

Reviewed the science of how and what constitutes a gopher tortoise minimum viable population (MVP) (250 adult gopher tortoises on 100 ha of high quality habitat at a density of .40) and defines primary populations as 250+ animals and support populations as 249-50 animals or secondary support population as <50 animals that could serve educational opportunities or be considered for augmentation of populations according to the Population Viability Analysis Symposia.

Discussed the USFWS 3 R's concept that will be considered when assessing population viability. 1) Representation – it is important to have tortoises on the landscape (with some degree of persistence) and is measured at the species and, possibly, population level, 2) Redundancy – multiple populations per unit are needed to protect against unit-wide extirpation and is measured at the species level, lastly 3) Resiliency – large populations protect against extirpation by catastrophic events and is measured at the population level.

In practice, the 3R's are interrelated – resiliency supports redundancy, representation supports resiliency, etc. Alabama also considered the 3 R's when determining potential targets needed for the state, which followed the Georgia model.

- State updates across the candidate range.

Ericha Nix, ADCNR, DWFF, Nongame Wildlife Program, Gopher Tortoise State Lead, Certified Wildlife Biologist®

Described gopher tortoise conservation efforts throughout the candidate range focusing on Alabama efforts and current needs. The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) has contributed a great deal of funding and effort to conserve this species with limited capacity as compared to other states. Public lands surveys, funded by ADCNR, were completed in Oct. 2017. With over 95% of Alabama's gopher tortoise habitat in private ownership, private lands surveys are desperately needed to provide current distribution and population structure information that will be vital to the USFWS Species Status Assessment. Gopher Tortoise Conservation Units have been developed and state population targets were recommended to ADCNR leadership.

Alabama stakeholders should continue to: 1) identify, prioritize and *protect* viable populations, 2) create a state regulation to protect the burrow from intentional destruction (exempting agricultural and silvicultural practices as other states do), 3) continue enhancing and creating tortoise habitat through applied management activities, land acquisitions, or incentives to landowners through creative and strategic partnerships, and 4) educate the public regarding management assistance, importance as a keystone species and what it means to the landowner if the species becomes federally listed. These mentioned actions will be vital to the listing decision in 2023.

- Gopher tortoise population status summary on public lands.

Dr. Sharon Hermann, Auburn University, Biological Sciences, Professor

Reviewed definitions of MVP and primary and support populations. Also described survey methodology and outcomes of using Line Transect Distance Sampling (LTDS); the preferred survey method of USFWS. The amount (acres) of suitable soils and current habitat condition are the most important criteria to determine if LTDS is appropriate for potential survey sites. LTDS is a labor intensive and costly survey method that may not be appropriate or an efficient use of funds for all properties in Alabama.

Provided current population estimates for eight public lands that warranted full surveys and six properties that were limited to pilot surveys due to little or moderately appropriate habitat. Only one known MVP occurs in Alabama at one Conecuh National Forest site. Though population densities are low on mentioned ADCNR lands, it should not be considered a lost cause. These permanently protected lands will contribute highly to the conservation of the tortoise in Alabama by continuing and increasing habitat management activities (prescribed fire, timber stand thinning, etc.) coupled with the consideration of consolidating animals (only animals found within current property boundary, not translocation) to meet the needed appropriate density for an MVP.

- Understanding gopher tortoise ecology on working private forests.

Darren Miller, Weyerhaeuser Company, Science Advisor, Southern Timberlands Technology, Certified Wildlife Biologist®

Presented information about working forests on industrial private landowner properties. Thirty-nine million acres or 87% of forest resources are privately owned in the southeastern United States. Discussed the importance of collaboration opportunities with various partners (state and federal agencies) with research

goals aimed to determine the ability of private managed forests to provide gopher tortoise conservation value as part of listing decision process.

- Lemons to lemonade: Turning perceived conservation challenges into conservation opportunities.

Andrew Nix, ADCNR, DWFF, Registered Forester

Discussed current conservation issues and challenged the stakeholders to think outside the box and view issues as potential opportunities. Perceived issues could become an opportunity by tweaking or changing current management regimes or operations with minimal loss. Are there areas within a large landowner's land base that would be more suitable and economical to manage differently; with the mindset of working to preclude the listing of the gopher tortoise?

For instance, could a landowner designate 500-1000 acres out of the thousands of acres owned and manage those acres "differently" to support and protect primary and/or secondary tortoise populations? Managed differently means, could the landowner carve out sufficient size areas (maybe called conservation areas) of poor soils where loblolly is grown where stands are customarily fertilized at least twice during a rotation length, and consider converting that stand to longleaf and manage for a saw timber rotation, which along with prescribed fire could create optimal gopher tortoise habitat? Could these same conservation areas be managed with natural regeneration into the future, again cutting costs of site prep and artificial regeneration, while providing open canopy and pine needles to further aid the prescribed fire regime on a more frequent interval, every 2 years, benefitting the gopher tortoise and other wildlife species? Could these areas that are managed this way possibly demand a higher recreational lease rate than a loblolly plantation, due to improved forage and nesting for game species like deer and turkey, along with the gopher tortoise? Are there ways that State agencies, prescribed burn associations, and/or nonprofits could conduct the prescribed burn regime necessary to maintain optimal habitat?

- Stakeholder Updates:

➤ <i>AL Depart. Of Transportation</i>	<i>Keith Walker</i>	Environmental Specialist, Sr., Wildlife Biologist
➤ <i>NRCS</i>	<i>Steve Musser</i>	ASTC – Programs
➤ <i>Sustainable Forestry Initiative</i>	<i>Ashley Smith</i>	AL SFI SIC Coordinator
➤ <i>Alabama Forestry Commission</i>	<i>Ray Metzler</i>	Threatened and Endangered Species Coordinator, Certified Wildlife Biologist®
➤ <i>Alabama Power Company</i>	<i>Chad Fitch</i>	Fish and Wildlife Biologist
➤ <i>US Forest Service</i>	<i>Ryan Shurette</i>	USFS, Wildlife Program Manager, Certified Wildlife Biologist®
➤ <i>Alabama Forestry Association</i>	<i>Tyler Sibley</i>	Fish and Wildlife Biologist
➤ <i>ADCNR, State Lands Division</i>	<i>Jeremy Doss</i>	Land Stewardship Officer, Wildlife Biologist
➤ <i>The Westervelt Company</i>	<i>Jonathan Lowery</i>	Forest Sustainability & Policy Manager, Registered Forester
➤ <i>The Nature Conservancy</i>	<i>Chuck Byrd</i>	Land Steward
➤ <i>Longleaf Alliance</i>	<i>Ryan Mitchell</i>	Outreach and Technical Assistance Coordinator, Wildlife Biologist

Outcomes and where we go from here.

Now that participating stakeholders have information regarding the current conservation status in Alabama, a blueprint is needed to provide insight on how stakeholders can contribute to precluding federal listing of the tortoise in Alabama. For example, how can stakeholders contribute to data gaps, survey needs, obtaining access to private lands, increasing and improving tortoise habitat, and education and outreach. Due to many unanswered questions

stakeholders felt that the blueprint could not yet be described and deferred further discussions until the next meeting. However, two committees were formed to further gopher tortoise conservation efforts as discussed throughout the meeting. The 2 committees created were: 1) Education and Outreach Committee (Ashley Smith, Committee Chair), 2) Gopher Tortoise Survey Committee (Dr. Sharon Hermann, Committee Chair). Committees will meet independently and outline their objectives and deliverables as discussed throughout the meeting.

To keep momentum going stakeholders unanimously supported the need for an additional meeting in June/July 2018 to hear committee reports, state updates, and updates from USFWS. Ericha Nix will organize, plan and facilitate the June/July meeting.

The goal for the next meeting is to develop methods for stakeholders to contribute to data gaps, survey needs, gain access to private lands, continue increasing and improving tortoise habitat, and discuss options of protecting both primary and support tortoise populations.

Lastly, I would like to thank both the Poarch Creek Band Indians and Sustainable Forestry Initiative, for sponsoring the first ALTA meeting.