

Protecting gopher tortoises benefits the environment and the landowner

- Home sites that have on-site preserves offer added value for wildlife viewing.
- Financial and technical assistance is available to certified gopher tortoise recipient sites that create and manage habitat for tortoises displaced by development.
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) Landowner Assistance Program has cost-share opportunities available for activities associated with wildlife habitat conservation and management on private lands.



Gopher tortoise conservation

In September 2007, the FWC approved the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan. The goal of the plan is to restore and maintain viable populations of gopher tortoises throughout Florida. To meet this goal, the plan includes four conservation objectives:

- Improve habitat management on protected lands;
- Increase protected gopher tortoise habitat;
- Restock gopher tortoises to protected and managed habitats; and
- Decrease gopher tortoise mortality on lands proposed for development.

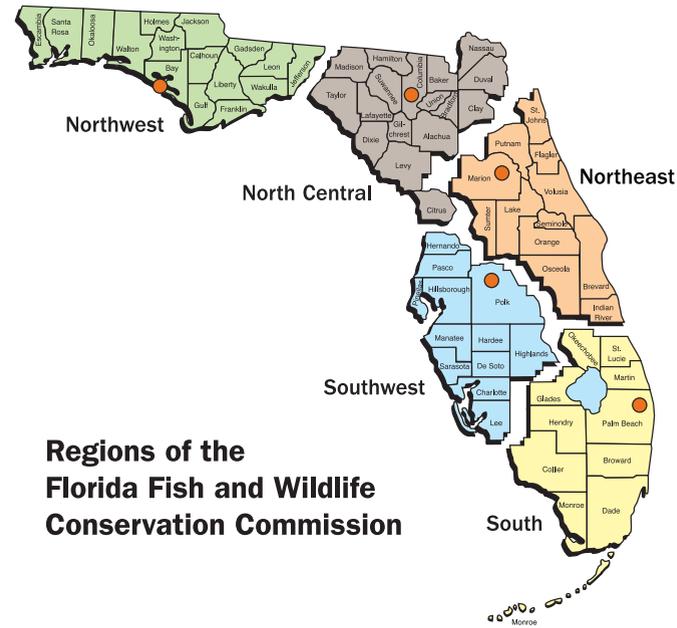
These objectives will be met by implementing actions outlined in broad categories such as permitting, local government coordination, law enforcement, habitat preservation and management, population and disease management, landowner incentives, monitoring and research, and education and outreach.

Before you clear land or move tortoises, know the law and obtain proper permits. Visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise or call the gopher tortoise conservation biologist in your region.



Robert La Follette

Gopher tortoises generally graze within 160 feet of their burrow on a variety of plant types including broadleaf grasses, wiregrass, prickly pear cactus, clover, dandelion and seasonal fruits and berries - wild grape, blackberry, blueberry and partridge berry.



Regions of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Northwest Region

3911 Highway 2321
Panama City, FL 32409-1658
850-265-3676

North Central Region

3377 East U.S. Highway 90
Lake City, FL 32055-8795
386-758-0525

Northeast Region

1239 S.W. 10th Street
Ocala, FL 34474-2797
352-732-1225

Southwest Region

3900 Drane Field Road
Lakeland, FL 33811-1299
863-648-3203

South Region

8535 Northlake Boulevard
Palm Beach, FL 33412-3303
561-625-5122

For more information on gopher tortoise permits and gopher tortoise habitat management, contact your regional gopher tortoise conservation biologist or call 850-488-3831, or visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise.

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Before you build

What every landowner should know about gopher tortoises before breaking ground



Cliff Leonard



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

MyFWC.com



Cliff Leonard

A gopher tortoise burrow is a tunnel in the ground with a half moon-shaped (flat bottom, arched roof) burrow entrance. Gopher tortoises typically excavate and use two or more burrows.

Determine if you have gopher tortoises on your land

Before disturbing vegetation or ground in preparation for development, survey the entire property to determine the number and location of gopher tortoise burrows.

If possible, conduct burrow surveys when tortoises are most active, April – October; this window is extended in southern Florida.

During the colder months, burrows may appear abandoned. Consider burrows with eroded or debris-covered entrances as potentially occupied.

You may wish to consult with an authorized gopher tortoise agent (a person who possesses a permit and is qualified to capture and relocate gopher tortoises) to determine whether gopher tortoises inhabit your property. A list of authorized agents is available at MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise.



Cliff Leonard

Gopher tortoise burrows are usually easy to spot because of the sand mound or “apron” created during excavation at the burrow entrance. Tortoise tracks, scat, shell fragments (tortoises may lay eggs in sand outside the burrow) or feeding trails in the surrounding area indicate tortoise activity.

The gopher tortoise and land development

A keystone species

The gopher tortoise is an industrious and ancient reptile that inhabits dry upland areas throughout Florida. It has stumpy, elephantine hind feet and flattened, shovel-like forelimbs perfectly designed for digging.

This remarkable tortoise excavates underground burrows that average 15 feet long and 6 feet deep. Burrows maintain a near constant temperature and humidity year-round, providing a safe haven from temperature extremes, predators and seasonal fires.

More than 350 animals depend on these burrows for refuge including several state and federally protected species, such as the gopher frog, burrowing owl, Florida pine snake, Florida mouse and eastern indigo snake. The gopher tortoise is a “keystone species” because so many other species depend on it for their survival – a decline in gopher tortoise numbers results in a decline in the other species that rely on its burrows.

If you have gopher tortoises on your land, your options are:

- Avoid development altogether.
- Avoid destruction of tortoise burrows and any impacts within 25 feet of the burrow.
- Preserve additional habitat on-site, and relocate all gopher tortoises to this area. A permit is required.
- Relocate tortoises off-site to protected recipient sites. A permit is required.

Clearing, grading or other site disturbance which occurs before you receive your permit or before “100% burrow surveys” have been verified by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s (FWC) may result in a violation. It also may delay your project and increase cost. Bottom line – make sure you have received your permit and that burrow surveys have been verified by FWC before land clearing starts.

An authorized gopher tortoise agent permitted by the FWC must assist with all relocation activities under all permits, except on-site relocation conducted under the “10 or Fewer Burrows” permit.

Submit application forms for gopher tortoise permits at least 90 days prior to the time needed.

For information about permitting or to apply for a gopher tortoise permit online, visit MyFWC.com/GopherTortoise and click on permits.



Robert La Follette



George Bruner

Legal protection for gopher tortoises and their burrows

During the last century gopher tortoise numbers in Florida have declined. Habitat destruction, fragmentation and degradation have placed these burrow-building tortoises in peril.

The gopher tortoise is classified as a threatened species in Florida. Florida law (Chapter 68A-27, Florida Administrative Code), makes it illegal to take, harm, harass, capture, possess, sell or transport any gopher tortoise or parts thereof or their eggs, or molest, damage or destroy gopher tortoise burrows, except as authorized by specific Commission permit.

Impacts to gopher tortoises and their burrows may constitute “taking” under the law. An illegal take of a gopher tortoise burrow includes, but is not limited to, damaging, collapsing or covering a gopher tortoise burrow from land clearing, bulldozing, grading, paving or building construction associated with land development, except as authorized by specific Commission permit.

Property owners (or their agents) must obtain permits from the FWC to capture and relocate all gopher tortoises before any land clearing, grading or other development-related activities can begin.