Get The Facts About Gopher Tortoises:

Best Management Practices

Wildlife Best Management Practices (BMPs) can prevent or minimize impacts on gopher tortoises and their burrows. The BMPs were developed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences (DACS), using input from farmers and foresters. Throughout Florida, gopher tortoises dig large burrows with distinct half-moon shaped entrances. Tortoise burrows are found in habitats with dry, sandy soils, particularly with ample herbaceous ground cover. Gopher tortoises often live in areas with on-going agriculture or silviculture (forestry) practices. Gopher tortoises, their eggs and burrows are all protected under state law.

Best Management Practices

- Maintain habitat integrity by implementing habitat management activities on forest lands or associated uplands.
- Locate heavy equipment and supplemental feeding areas away from active gopher tortoise burrows. If heavy equipment must be located in such areas: a) identify and mark burrows, b) avoid damage to the burrow opening and c) avoid damage to the burrow apron during nesting season (May to September).
- Avoid direct contact with all visible gopher tortoise burrows and burrow aprons from May to September.
- When practical, minimize heavy equipment use during September and October, when gopher tortoise hatchlings are most numerous.

Ways to Avoid Disturbance

Ground disturbance should be avoided May to September and extended into October when hatchlings are most prevalent. When avoidance is not an option:

- Mark burrows with a stake or flagging tape so they are visible.
- During and after logging operations, clear debris off of the ground and prevent clogging of burrows.
- Set mower blades at least 18 inches above the ground to avoid injuring tortoises.
- From May to October, avoid operating heavy machinery during cooler part of the day (early morning); from November to April, avoid operating during warmer parts of the day (midday). Gopher tortoises are most active at these times.

FWC

Suggested Habitat Maintenance

- Tree farmers should plant the minimum amount of profitable trees (454 trees per acre), which allows sunlight to reach the forest floor promoting herbaceous ground cover.
- Large stands of trees should be split into multiple stands of different ages.
- Use prescribed burning when appropriate. If prescribed burning is not feasible, control ground cover and mid-story hardwoods using herbicides.
- Apply herbicides that will significantly affect hardwood species and not herbaceous vegetation; banded application of herbicides is preferred over broadcast application.
- Establish ground cover prior to planting pine trees when restoring habitat on degraded sites. Create a border of herbaceous vegetation around the property boundaries for areas adjacent to agriculture.

Are Permits Needed?

Agriculture, silviculture or other activities intended to improve native wildlife habitat do not require a permit.

An FWC permit is required for any site-clearing activity conducted as a precursor to development, or for any development activity on lands within 25 feet of a gopher tortoise burrow.

Find out more about gopher tortoises, including habitat management and permitting, at:

MyFWC.com/gophertortoise

Learn more about Wildlife BMPs:

Agriculture: **Freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Agricultural-Water-Policy**

Forestry: **Freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service**

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
MyFWC.com