

For Immediate Release

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Signup ends April 30, 2012

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION EFFORTS TO SUPPORT LOCAL ECONOMIES AND PRESERVE FARM AND RANCH TRADITIONS

Innovative partnership preserves working lands and protects at-risk species

ATHENS, GA, (April 5, 2012)—State Conservationist James E. Tillman Sr., of the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), announced today that financial assistance was approved under the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) to help sustain breeding populations of the gopher tortoise through the Working Lands For Wildlife (WLFW) partnership.

The NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) formed a new partnership to accelerate wildlife conservation. Under this partnership, WLFW has two primary goals: 1) restore populations of declining wildlife species, 2) strengthen rural economies through productive working lands.

WLFW is a partnership with farmers, ranchers and forest landowners to use innovative approaches to restore and protect the habitats for the gopher tortoise, an at-risk species, and other vulnerable game species.

Working Lands for Wildlife will assist private land owners in the creation and maintenance of habitat necessary to sustain breeding populations of gopher tortoises in their current range. It focuses on the creation, management and maintenance of pine savanna habitat.

Landowners can sign-up to manage and restore high-priority habitats for the gopher tortoise that are located across the southern part of the state.

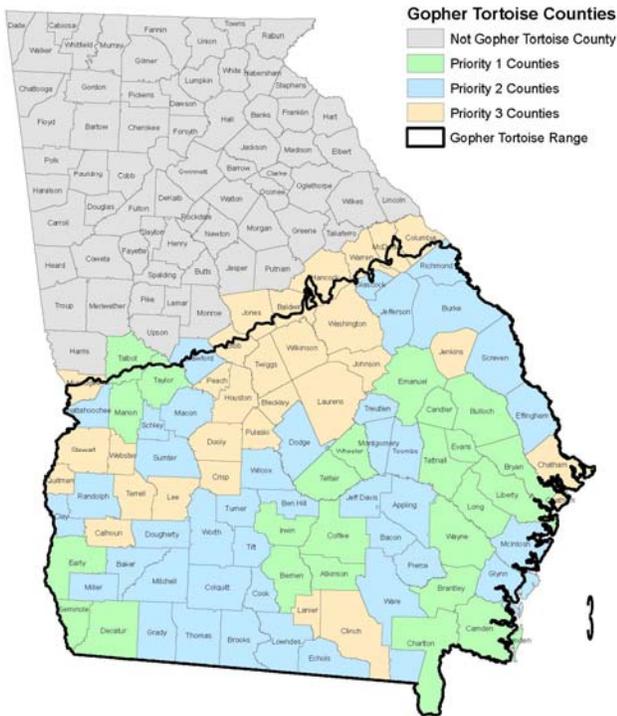
The three primary practices are 1) Tree planting of Longleaf Pine (*Pinus palustris*), 2) Prescribed burning and 3) Mid story hardwood removal. Herbicide use will be restricted to hand crews only. The gopher tortoise prefers sandy soils so eligible lands will need to be at least 50 percent of the suitable soil types.

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Helping People Help the Land

Georgia Focal Area

Some facts about the gopher tortoise:



- Longleaf pine forests are some of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems and provide critical habitat for the gopher tortoise and threatened and endangered species. The gopher tortoise is considered a keystone species and an indicator of longleaf pine ecosystem health.
- Gopher tortoises depend on deep, well drained soils and an open understory that provides open sunny sites for nesting. Its burrows provide vital habitat and shelter for many other endangered species. The gopher tortoise also aid in seed dispersal for several plant species.
- Habitat destruction, degradation, and human predation have greatly reduced the gopher tortoise populations.

Historically, more than 90 million acres of what is now the southeastern United States were covered by longleaf pine savanna - today, only 3.4 million acres remain.

- More than 80 percent of gopher tortoise habitat is in private or corporate ownership.

Interested producers and landowners in focal areas can enroll in the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program on a continuous basis at their local NRCS field office. NRCS funds from WHIP will share the cost of conservation practices with landowners in areas known to support the gopher tortoise.

Nationally for 14 years, WHIP has worked to protect, restore or develop fish and wildlife habitat for many species, including those considered at-risk. Since 2003, about \$310 million has been committed to 23,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to provide wildlife treatments on four million acres of private working lands.

For more information about WHIP and other NRCS conservation programs, visit the Georgia NRCS Web site at www.ga.nrcs.usda.gov, or contact your local NRCS office.

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