



# Gopher Tortoise

## 2024 Progress Report



The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a keystone species of America's longleaf pine forests. It is the only land tortoise native to the eastern United States, living primarily in longleaf pine savannas of the Southeast. The gopher tortoise dwells in pine forests with deep, well-drained, sandy soils and an open understory that provides plant foods and nesting sites.

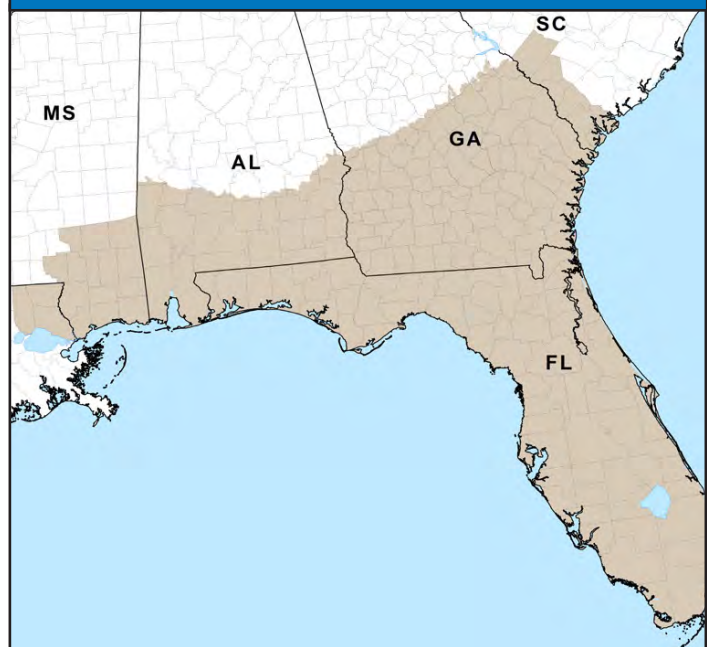
The gopher tortoise is a unique and iconic species that creates habitat niches critical to the survival of many different animals. As its name implies, the gopher tortoise digs burrows of up to 40 feet in length that allow escape from danger and hot weather. Gopher tortoise burrows are a unique feature of Southeastern landscapes, harboring up to 360 other wildlife species.

Fire suppression, lack of forest management, conversion to other forest types, urban development, and overgrazing all cause loss and fragmentation of gopher tortoise habitat.

## NRCS and the Gopher Tortoise

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help private landowners establish and manage longleaf pine stands. Farm Bill programs offered by NRCS provide landowners with tools to systematically address specific habitat and timber stand improvement needs. WLFW also provides landowners with regulatory predictability under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which ensures regulatory peace of mind for landowners who continue to manage their working farms and ranches using NRCS-prescribed conservation practices for up to 30 years.

### PROJECT BOUNDARY



## Actions

- Promoting increased use of prescribed fire
- Improving vegetation management
- Re-establishing longleaf forests
- Supporting prescribed grazing management
- Protecting existing quality habitats

## Outcomes and Impacts

Landowners are restoring habitat for the gopher tortoise and other species that depend on pine forests in the Southeast. Much of this work is occurring in priority areas for conservation, which were developed in 2016 by state and federal partners to focus conservation to maximize benefits for the species. Since 2012, landowners have restored and protected over one million acres to support gopher tortoise goals through WLFW.

About 80 percent of the gopher tortoise range falls on private lands, making conservation efforts on working lands pivotal to the species' success.

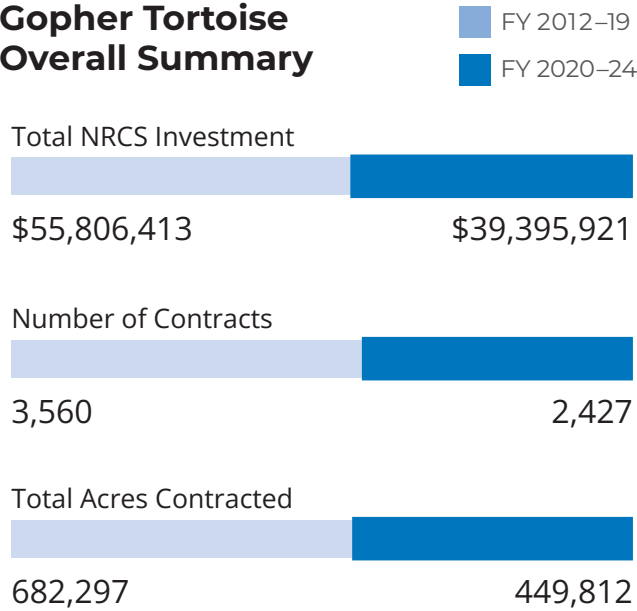


| Fiscal Year 2024 Gopher Tortoise<br>NRCS Financial Assistance Contract Summary |        |                 |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------|
| State                                                                          | Acres  | NRCS Investment | Contracts |
| Alabama                                                                        | 48,311 | \$3,460,594     | 243       |
| Florida                                                                        | 0      | \$0             | 0         |
| Georgia                                                                        | 12,886 | \$894,095       | 66        |
| Louisiana                                                                      | 1,028  | \$172,664       | 7         |
| Mississippi                                                                    | 10,478 | \$961,836       | 50        |
| South Carolina                                                                 | 2,037  | \$494,736       | 25        |
| Total                                                                          | 74,739 | \$5,983,925     | 391       |
| Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, Oct. 2024  |        |                 |           |

NRCS Goals

NRCS staff from the six-state range of the gopher tortoise developed a WLFW Gopher Tortoise Implementation Strategy for fiscal years 2020–2024 as part of the agency’s long-term path forward for gopher tortoise conservation. Milestones in the strategy will provide important habitat and contribute to the long-term conservation and recovery goals for the gopher tortoise. NRCS supports landowners working to create and protect more than 975,700 acres of gopher tortoise habitat by the end of fiscal year 2024 under the current WLFW implementation plan.

Gopher Tortoise Overall Summary



2024 Milestones:  
Enhancing Habitat for Gopher Tortoise

|                                   | Acres Completed 2012-2016 | Acres Completed 2017-2019 | Acres Completed 2020-2024 | Total Acres in Progress (Planned) 2012-2024 | Planned - Implemented |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Longleaf Establishment            | 37,567                    | 18,330                    | 33,221                    | 131,530                                     | 42,412                |
| Prescribed Grazing                | 0                         | 14,472                    | 7,351                     | 45,371                                      | 23,548                |
| Habitat Protection                | 0                         | 2,432                     | 19,472                    | 0                                           | 21,904                |
| Understory Planting (CP-420)      | 0                         | 0                         | 139                       | 513                                         | 374                   |
| Forest Stand Improvement (CP-666) | 29,257                    | 25,874                    | 33,799                    | 145,764                                     | 56,835                |
| Prescribed Fire                   | 185,272                   | 187,065                   | 308,325                   | 984,220                                     | 303,558               |
| Vegetation Management             | 247,065                   | 26,783                    | 74,261                    | 673,119                                     | 325,010               |

