



NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

GOPHER TORTOISE

Status: At Risk



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 savannahs 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.

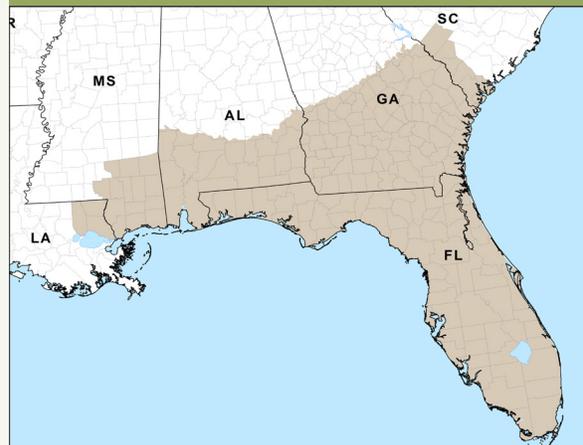
The gopher tortoise is a unique and iconic species that creates habitat niches critical to the survival of many different animals. As its name implies, the gopher tortoise digs burrows of up to 40 feet in length that allow escape from danger and hot weather. Gopher tortoise burrows are a unique feature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

Through Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW), 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 compliance 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 as a way to best direct conservation to maximize benefits for the species. Since 2012, landowners have restored and protected more than 300,000 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.

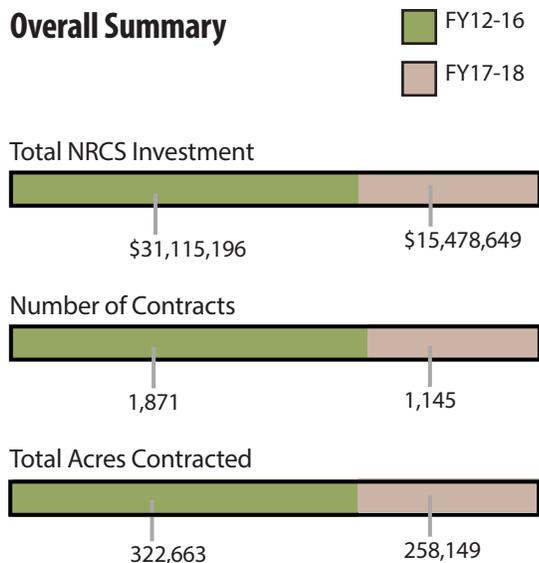
Fiscal Year 2018 Gopher Tortoise NRCS Financial Assistance Contract Summary			
State	Acres	NRCS Investment	Contracts
Alabama	53,011	\$3,633,016	327
Florida	57,501	\$1,969,819	43
Georgia	8,095	\$629,115	46
Louisiana	416	\$253,942	8
Mississippi	19,216	\$1,177,662	117
South Carolina	103	42,902	1
Total	138,342	\$7,706,456	542

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, October 2018.

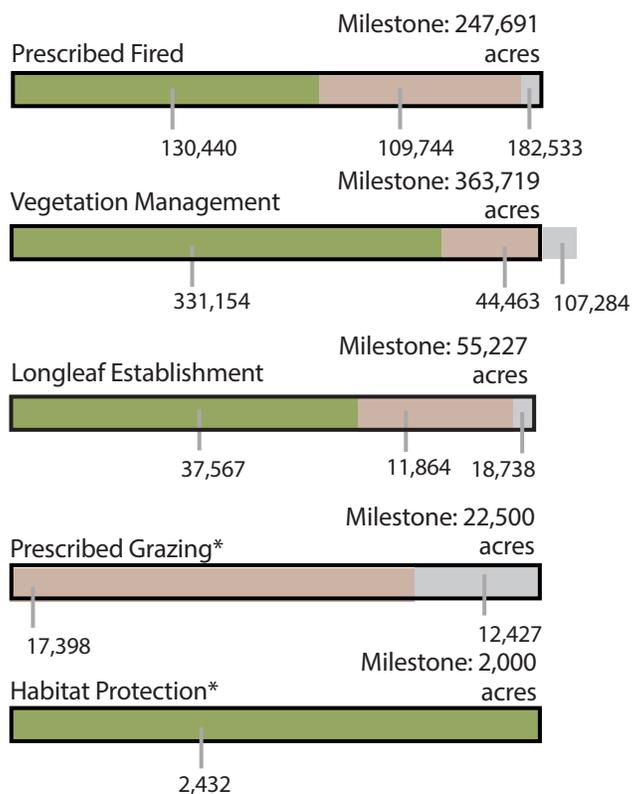
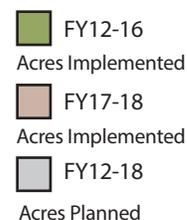
NRCS Goals

NRCS staff from the six-state range of the gopher tortoise developed a WLFW Gopher Tortoise Implementation Strategy for fiscal years 2017 and 2018 as part of the agency's long-term path forward for gopher tortoise conservation. Milestones in the strategy provided important habitat and contributed to the long-term conservation and recovery goals for the gopher tortoise. NRCS met its goal of supporting landowners to create and protect 205,000 acres of gopher tortoise habitat by the end of fiscal year 2018.

Overall Summary



2018 Milestones: Progress on Goals and Priorities by State



*New conservation actions for fiscal years 2017 and 2018.