

USACE Natural Resource Management Reptiles & Amphibians



Gopher Tortoise

FAST FACTS

REASONS FOR LISTING STATUS: The gopher tortoise is listed under the Endangered Species Act as Threatened when found west of Mobile and Tombigbee Rivers in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Wherever else found this species is considered a candidate species for possible listing under the ESA.

The gopher tortoise listing is the result of a combination of factors. The species is slow to reach maturity and have a low reproductive rate; these factors coupled with habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation has resulted in significant population declines and extirpation from many areas the tortoise once occupied. (USFWS)

MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION: The gopher tortoise was listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987. In 1990, a recovery plan was finalized for this species. The USFWS has not designated critical habitat for this species. (USFWS)

At the state level, the gopher tortoise is listed as threatened or endangered in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

HABITAT NEEDS: The gopher tortoise inhabits dry oak sandhills, longleaf pine habitat, dry hammock, pine flatwoods, dry prairie, coastal grasslands and dunes, mixed hardwood-pine communities, and manmade habitats such as powerline right-of-ways and roadsides. (USFWS)

- The species thrives in longleaf pine forests and benefits from management for the federally listed Red-cockaded Woodpecker.
- Gopher tortoise occupied habitat generally has well-drained, sandy soils. This species needs large parcels of undeveloped land not fragmented by roads, buildings, and other human construction as these barriers limit food and burrow availability.
- In clay soils, burrows are significantly shorter which may result in respiratory limitations. (NatureServe)

Description: The gopher tortoise is a large terrestrial turtle which grows to have a shell length up to 14.6 inches long. Full grown turtles weigh between 8 and 15 pounds. The turtle is mostly dark brown or gray-black and has a yellow, hingeless under-shell. These tortoises have elephantine hind feet and shovel-like forefeet. Males typically have more pronounced concavity of the lower shell and a longer gular projection than females. (USFWS)

Photos: Jessica Radich of U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Natural Resource Management (NRM)

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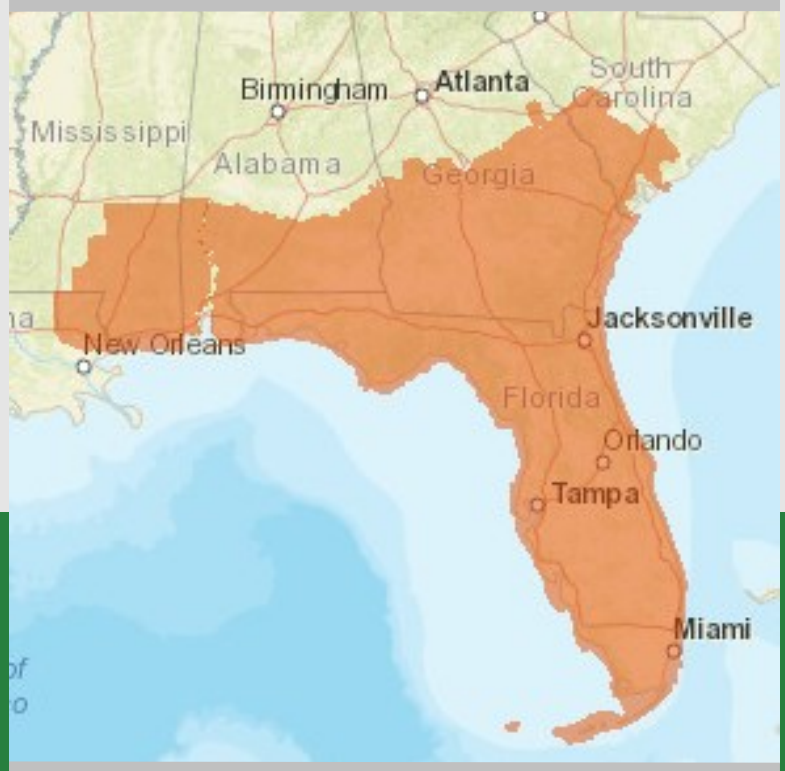


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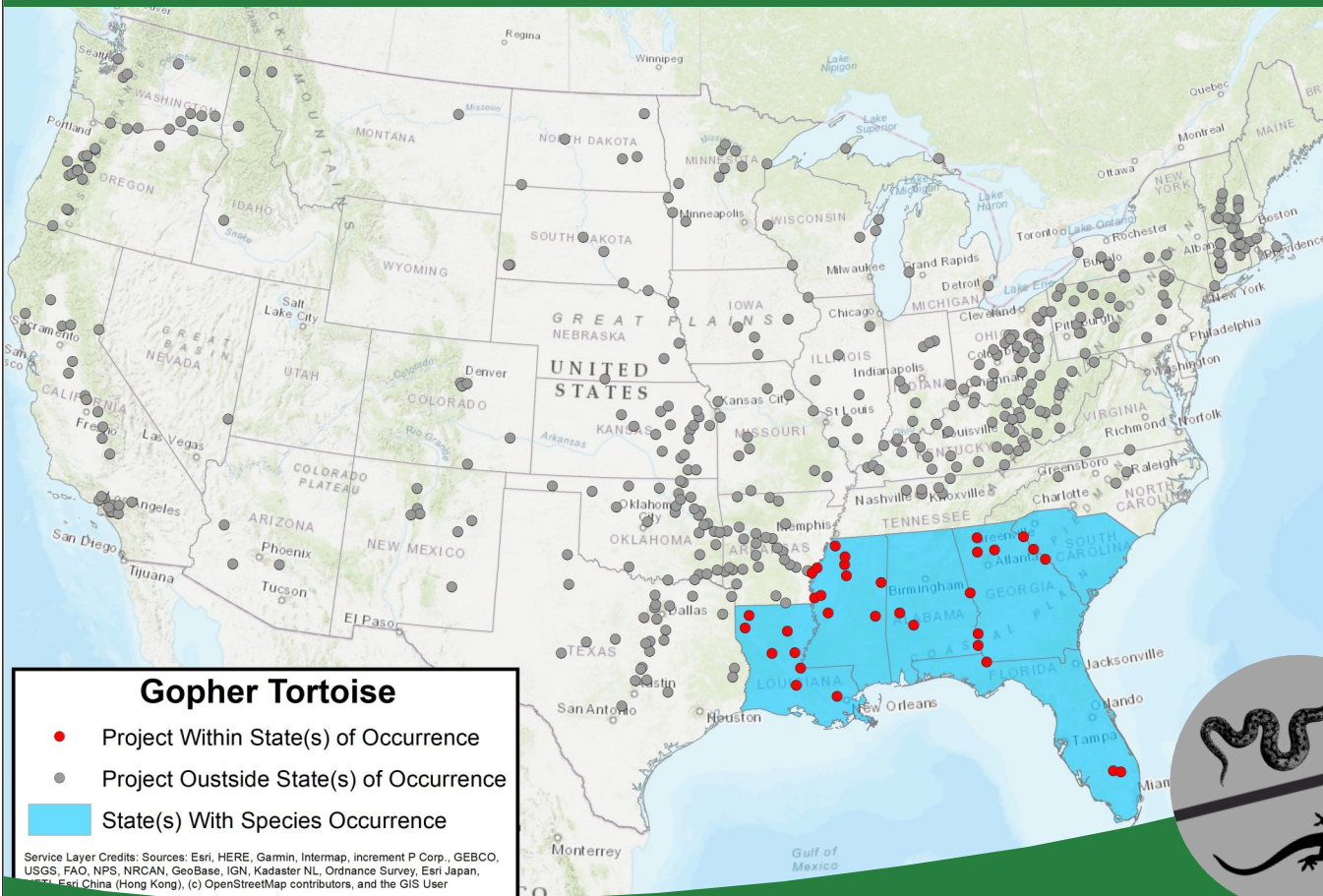
USACE ROLE:

According to the Engineering Research and Development Center’s Threatened and Endangered Species Team Cost Estimates, the USACE has expended over \$983,000 on efforts relating to the gopher tortoise. Of that sum, over \$182,000 was spent on habitat protection, construction, creation, and/or restoration. Additionally, over \$346,000 was expended on inventorying, surveying, and monitoring the gopher tortoise.

Map, right: Range map for the gopher tortoise provided by the USFWS Environmental Conservation Online System.



WHAT IS USACE NRM DOING: The USACE is a participant in a Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) for the gopher tortoise. A CCA is a cooperative effort among state, federal, non-governmental, and private organizations. The purpose of this Agreement is to collectively implement proactive gopher tortoise conservation measures across its eastern range. The CCA initial efforts began in June of 2005 with the creation of a Memorandum of Understanding which was signed in 2016. The aim of the MOU was to foster an increased level of communication, collaboration, and conservation among the signatories to actively manage and conserve gopher tortoise populations and habitat. The CCA is still in place today with a recent revision in 2018. The USACE remains a committed participant in the CCA.



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