

Help halt the federal listing of the **GOPHER TORTOISE**



The Gopher Tortoise is being considered for widespread protection by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). A petition filed by an organization known as "Save Our Big Scrub and Wild South" to federally list the Gopher Tortoise throughout its range in the US is currently under review by the FWS. Because of a lack of funding, the FWS initially failed to act on the petition, prompting conservation groups to threaten a lawsuit. Florida already classifies the gopher tortoise as "threatened", due largely to its loss of habitat. Silvicultural activities, however, are largely exempted from state permitting/mitigation requirements because they have not been viewed as a significant threat to the Tortoise. Rules ultimately enforcing any federal listing, however, may not treat forestry in the same manner, and it is known that mitigation measures involving the Gopher Tortoise in the part of its range where it is already federally listed are very expensive

*Late last year we asked private landowners to help out in an overall effort to avoid the Federal listing of the Gopher Tortoise as a "Threatened Species". The **Florida Forestry Association** and other Forestry Associations in the south began collecting information regarding favorable forest management practices currently being practiced on private lands within the range of the tortoise. The information is now "in", and being summarized and incorporated into an overall region-wide response to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. All information provided regarding private lands is being kept strictly anonymous. **Florida's contribution to this effort is very significant: 16 surveys were returned covering over 200,000 acres where current management practices favor the Tortoise** (i.e. provide open stand conditions and enhance herbaceous vegetation).*

***Most recently, The Florida Forestry Association has joined with a coalition of other key Florida professional associations, including the Florida Farm Bureau, to oppose the listing of the Gopher Tortoise as a federally "Threatened Species", as well as the related identification and designation of "critical habitat".** The coalition will assemble and provide the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with extensive information documenting the current population levels of the Tortoise in Florida, the extent of land management practices favorable to the Tortoise, and ongoing state efforts to protect the Tortoise and its habitat through the implementation of a statewide management plan. The outcome of this process stands to be critically important to those whose livelihood depends directly on their ability to economically manage their forested properties for the production of forest products.*

Today, we are asking our members who own land and those who derive value from Florida's managed forests to join our effort by contributing to a special fund to assist in the cost of this effort. The Association's participation on the Coalition is very expensive and due to its timing was not included in the operating budget for this year. We are calling on our members to help fund the financial commitment and other legal challenges that may arise from the attempt to have the species classified as "threatened". A form is provided to signify your interest and payment for supporting this effort. Thank you for your support.