



**Natural Resources  
Conservation Service**

3381 Skyway Drive  
Auburn, Alabama 36830  
Voice: 334-887-4581  
Email: [Amelia.Hines@al.usda.gov](mailto:Amelia.Hines@al.usda.gov)  
Web: <http://www.al.nrcs.usda.gov>

# News Release

Release No.: 0000001.17

Contact:  
Amelia Hines Dortch, (334) 887-4581  
[Amelia.Hines@al.usda.gov](mailto:Amelia.Hines@al.usda.gov)

## **USDA Releases Two-Year Strategy to Help Gopher Tortoise**

*Private Landowners to Voluntarily Restore More Than 200,000 Additional Acres of Longleaf Forests in Southeast*

**AUBURN, AL Oct. 6, 2016** – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) today released a new two-year implementation strategy to help restore, enhance and protect longleaf pine forests in the Southeast, part of an ongoing effort to help the gopher tortoise rebound and combat the need for additional regulation of the species. Longleaf forests and many of its inhabitants like the gopher tortoise have declined over the past century, and USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is working with private landowners to conserve these historically important forests to the region's rural economies.

By the end of 2018, this Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) implementation strategy for the gopher tortoise plans to conserve more than 200,000 acres of gopher tortoise habitat in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. This builds on 278,000 acres conserved since the launch of WLFW in 2012 and represents a larger commitment by NRCS.

"More than 80 percent of gopher tortoise habitat is privately owned, meaning the land management decisions of private landowners are crucial to its success," said Ben Malone, State Conservationist in Alabama. "We offer landowners assistance to plan and implement sustainable forestry practices that benefit the gopher tortoise and other game and non-game species as well as improve forestry operations."

The gopher tortoise is listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act in the western part of its range, and it's a candidate for listing in the eastern part of its range. WLFW uses a science-based, targeted approach to benefit at-risk and protected species to invest resources from Farm Bill conservation programs, such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

"By using a science-based approach, we can direct resources where the biological returns are highest," Malone said.

Conversion to other forest types, urban development, fire suppression, poor forest management and overgrazing cause loss and fragmentation of longleaf forests, which once spanned from eastern Texas to southern Virginia.

**-More-**

The ecosystem's range has declined by almost 97 percent over the past 200 years. Longleaf pine trees, while slower growing than other pines like loblolly, provide highly valuable timber.

The strategy provides guidance on how and where the agency will work with landowners to address those threats. It relies on new priority areas for conservation, which were developed earlier this year with the help of conservation partners using population, soil and land use data to direct conservation actions to key areas across the six state range.

Through Farm Bill conservation programs, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help landowners voluntarily plan and implement forestry practices that restore and enhance these forests. Practices include use of prescribed burning, planting trees and managing invasive and undesirable plants. Fires historically burned through the pine savannahs of the South, suppressing woody undergrowth and enabling longleaf pine forests to have an open understory. A host of species adapted to these conditions are now in decline, but NRCS is prioritizing prescribed burning as a practice that mimics natural processes and restores suitable habitats.

Gopher tortoises depend on longleaf forests for their deep, well-drained soils and open understories for food and nesting sites. As its name implies, the gopher tortoise digs burrows up to 40 feet long, enabling them to escape from heat and danger. Its burrows harbor more than 350 other species, and it is considered a keystone species because its presence in pine savannahs supports the stability of many other species.

Habitat restored for the gopher tortoise benefits the red-cockaded woodpecker, black pine snake, bobwhite quail, white-tailed deer, turkey and dusky gopher frog. In total, 28 threatened and endangered species are dependent on well-managed longleaf pine forests.

WLFW and other partnership efforts to promote habitat restoration on private and public lands are working. Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined protections for the New England cottontail and the greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act were not needed largely because of collaborative efforts to conserve habitat on public and private lands. The cottontail and sage grouse are among many species to rebound or recover from conservation efforts on private lands; others include the Oregon chub, Arctic grayling, greater sage-grouse, Bi-State sage-grouse and Louisiana black bear.

Download the implementation strategy. To learn more about assistance opportunities, landowners should contact their local USDA service center.

Since 2009, USDA has invested more than \$29 billion to help producers make conservation improvements, working with a record 500,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to protect land and water on over 400 million acres nationwide. For an interactive look at USDA's work in conservation and forestry over the course of this Administration, visit [USDA Results: Caring for our Air, Land and Water](#).

#

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender. To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (866) 632-9992 (Toll-free Customer Service), (800) 877-8339 (Local or Federal relay), (866) 377-8642 (Relay voice users).