

Meeting with the US Fish and Wildlife Service

On July 11th the National Alliance of Forest Owners (NAFO) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) jointly hosted a meeting to discuss information relevant to the petition to list the Gopher Tortoise (GT) under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). As you are probably aware the GT, *Gopherus polyphemus*, is already listed in LA and AL west of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. The petition before the Service currently is to determine the need for a listing of the GT in the eastern portion of its range in AL, FL, GA and SC.

There were plenty of forest owners and wildlife experts represented at the July 11th meeting, state and federal wildlife agencies, state forestry associations and representatives from NAFO. This meeting was part of the Species Status Assessment (SSA) which is a relatively new process. It is all a part of an information gathering program to inform the listing decision which will probably be made in 2022.

The primary challenge that the FWS has is that 90+% of the GT habitat in the unlisted range is privately owned. As such there is very little population data to bolster the fact that most of us already know: Private working forests support viable populations of GTs across its range. One of the statements made from a landowner at the meeting is that the absence of data is not evidence of an absent population. There are numerous groups doing population surveys on private lands in AL, GA and FL. Private landowners could help prevent the listing of the GT by having their land surveyed and added to the currently documented populations on private working forests. Landowners can probably find out who is conducting surveys by contacting either their state forestry association or their state wildlife agency.

Another point that was brought out at the meeting was that with multiple private landowners, come many varied objectives in forest management. Those varied objectives result in an incredibly diverse mosaic of forest types across the landscape; that diversity helps the GT find what it needs without traveling far. Differing management objectives also lead to a “conservation continuum” of how well protected those GT populations are across the landscape.

Some of the key outcomes are listed below:

- A questionnaire will be sent out to private landowners to help gauge how much habitat exists on private land and how those lands are managed to help provide habitat.
- A small group will try to help the FWS develop some easily understood conservation practices that landowners can use to enhance GT habitat (like burning, thinning, woody and invasive plant control with herbicides, etc.).
- The group will continue to encourage private landowners to survey their land for GT populations and consider adding those population to an anonymous data base, summarized perhaps on that county level. These data will go to bolster the fact that private working forests provide viable GT habitat.

With everyone's help, we may be able to prevent a federal listing of the gopher tortoise.



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