



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Mobile County, Alabama

# Gopher Tortoise Mitigation Bank

## *Issue*

Mobile County Health Department is asking property owners to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) if gopher tortoises reside on their property. Gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) are protected by federal law in Mobile County. It is illegal to kill them or destroy their habitat. The Health Department is delaying percolation test approvals for septic tank installation pending assurances from the Service that their actions will not result in violating the Endangered Species Act.

## *Background*



Habitat loss is the greatest threat to gopher tortoises, particularly in Mobile County which has undergone a 94 percent increase in residential development in the past eight years. Approximately 1,300 homes will be constructed this year on lands which historically provided habitat for this dry land tortoise. In addition to new residential development, there has been a 100 percent increase in new roads and infrastructure to provide for Mobile County's population growth, which is up 6.4 percent since 1990.

Gopher tortoises need large parcels of undeveloped land that is not fragmented by roads or other growth-related development. Private property owners need assurances that they can move forward with residential development without costly delays and/or major changes to their plans. Mobile County needs to provide the infrastructure necessary to support its expanding population in a responsible way that manages growth and prepares for the future.

## *Potential Solution*

Big Creek Lake and the surrounding land are in the midst of the area being most heavily impacted by new growth. Developing an endangered species mitigation bank on property owned by Mobile's Board of Water and Sewer (BWS) would, at least temporarily, provide solutions to some of Mobile County's problems by:

- 1) Allowing private property owners to apply for a routine permit to relocate tortoises from their property on to the mitigation bank when no other alternative exists;
- 2) Providing Mobile County mitigation alternatives for unavoidable impacts caused by roadways, utilities and other infrastructure; and
- 3) Providing a revenue source to the BWS which would be used to manage a large, contiguous tract of land for optimum gopher tortoise habitat and to potentially acquire additional buffer land around Big Creek Lake, Mobile's only source of drinking water.