

Developing and Implementing a Market-Based Habitat Credit Bank for the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) on Family Forestlands

Market-Based Conservation Incentives Workshop:
Strategies for Family Forest Owners Participation in Biodiversity and Water Markets
September 10-11, 2008

Fire-maintained longleaf pine stands once covered 90 million acres in the Southeast but today have declined to roughly 3 million acres as a result of development, habitat conversion, and fire suppression. Lack of fire on the landscape has resulted in limited habitat for a variety of species dependent upon a more open canopy and diverse herbaceous ground cover. Consequently, many of the species have experienced population declines. With over 80% of land in private ownership in the Southeast, the greatest potential for restoration and management of pine habitat for declining species lies in the hands of family forest owners

The American Forest Foundation obtained a USDA NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant to develop and implement a habitat credit bank for the gopher tortoise on family forestlands. Project funds will be used to develop an innovative and flexible market-based framework that will help preclude the need to federally list the eastern population of the gopher tortoise. Under the program, interested family forest owners become eligible for gopher tortoise habitat management assistance and conservation credit payments through a reverse auction process that considers the potential habitat contribution of the property in combination with the landowner's bid requirements. The landowners selected to participate during the pilot-phase will be issued credits for verifiable gopher tortoise habitat. These credits can then be purchased by federal agencies (e.g., Department of Defense), state or county government, or private industry to offset unplanned impacts on gopher tortoise populations. The bank will be designed to maximize a net gain for the species and the entire process will be monitored, evaluated and adapted. This is the first attempt at developing a market-based approach for a non-listed species.

The initial stages of the project will focus on bank development including the determination of criteria needed to value and rank habitat sites and assign credits, the identification of priority lands and extensive landowner outreach. The model would have applicability throughout the gopher tortoise range in the Southeast and potential transferability to other species experiencing declines in other forested ecosystems. A variety of agencies and organizations are interested in promoting increased gopher tortoise management on private lands. For example, in the case of Department of Defense (DoD), the need for military readiness and training flexibility on installations in Southeast are some of the forces driving the need for innovative solutions. DoD is expecting increased installation activity in the coming years and is interested in collaborating with fellow stakeholders to encourage active management on private lands to offset unplanned impacts to gopher tortoise populations.

A habitat credit bank will demonstrate measurable progress in gopher tortoise conservation while simultaneously creating new income streams for private landowners ensuring their lands remain as managed forests, providing valuable ecosystem services and timber products. A working group of foresters, wildlife biologists, economists, conservation organizations, family forest owners and military personnel will undertake the development and implementation of the habitat credit bank processes and framework. The funding covers the development and pilot implementation of the habitat credit bank over a 3-year period.

This breakout session will focus on the important elements to consider for designing the project and determining the appropriate incentives for family forest owners to ensure their participation.

The American Forest Foundation is committed to creating a future where North American forests are sustained by a public which understands and values the social, economic, and environmental benefits they provide to our communities, our nation, and the world.