

Dear Colleague Interested in Gopher Tortoise Conservation,

The gopher tortoise has a tremendous impact on the ecology, economy and way of life in the Southeast. The tortoise is a federally protected species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in Louisiana, Mississippi and in Alabama west of the Mobile and Tombigbee Rivers. In the tortoise's eastern range – southeastern Alabama, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina – it is a candidate for listing under the ESA.

Together, we hope to preclude the need to federally list the gopher tortoise in its eastern range by taking conservation actions now and over the next several years.

To that end, the Service has developed a “roadmap” to start the conversation. The purpose of the attached “DRAFT Range-Wide Conservation Strategy for the Gopher Tortoise” is to outline the highest priority conservation efforts for the tortoise. If implemented, these efforts may reduce the current threats to the species to the point where we may preclude the need to list the eastern population under the ESA.

The draft strategy is primarily guided by existing threats to gopher tortoise survival stated in the status review for the eastern population (12-month Finding, July 2011) and western-range recovery plan. After input from you and other partners, the Service and States will jointly author the strategy. Beginning **October 2012**, the Service and States will begin greater public outreach and on-the-ground implementation of this “roadmap” with all partners.

Your participation and input is critical in shaping the strategy and how we collectively move forward. We welcome your comments, ideas, assistance and leadership in finalizing the primary objectives and actions of the conservation strategy. As you review the draft, please consider the following questions: Is this strategy an appropriate approach? Are the Objectives on target? Are there actions missing?

Towards the end of August we will be hosting several 1.5-hour webinars to provide more information and solicit comments. To sign up for one of the Webinars on August 21 (3 pm EST), August 22 (3 pm EST) or August 29 (1 pm EST) please go to <https://www.fws.gov/lists/listinfo/fw4candidateconservation>. You may also submit written comments via email to “fw4gophertortoise@fws.gov.” Matt Hinderliter, the Service's lead biologist for the gopher tortoise, will review those comments.

In addition, we intend to bring partners together annually to measure success toward conserving the gopher tortoise, reducing the threats, and revising the strategy as necessary through adaptive management.

If you have questions or would like to discuss this approach further, please contact Leo Miranda at 404-679-7085, Elsa Haubold at 850-488-3831, or Matt Hinderliter at 601-321-1132. We look forward to talking to you and continuing to partner in gopher tortoise conservation over the coming years.

Sincerely,



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