

GOPHER TORTOISE SPECIFIC

What is a gopher tortoise?

A gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a large land turtle that, as its name suggests, lives underground in a burrow. Adults can weigh up to 15 pounds and average 9-11 inches long, but some can get up to 15 inches long. They live throughout Florida, but prefer high, dry, sandy places such as longleaf pine sandhills, xeric oak hammocks, scrub, pine flatwoods, dry prairies and coastal dunes.

How are gopher tortoises doing?

Gopher tortoises live in many parts of Florida, but their numbers are declining. FWC biologists estimate that their numbers have gone down by 60-80 percent in the last century mainly because the places they live have been taken over by human development.

Gopher tortoises have been around for about 60 million years, but biologists who study these ancient reptiles are concerned they may disappear from many areas unless more is done to protect them and preserve the habitat they need.

Are gopher tortoises protected in Florida?

The gopher tortoise has been listed as a Species of Special Concern in Florida since 1979. Right now, it is illegal to kill, harass, injure, possess, transport, relocate or sell gopher tortoises or their eggs, or destroy their burrows, without a permit from the FWC.

FWC biologists are recommending the FWC commissioners reclassify the gopher tortoise from a species of special concern to a threatened species.

Why is the FWC evaluating the status of the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)?

The FWC received a petition to reclassify the gopher tortoise. As the listing process was updated, the Commission decided this petition should be evaluated under the listing process rules approved in April 2005. This listing action is on schedule, with phase one completion projected for June 2006.

What criteria did the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) meet to warrant this species being reclassified?

Based on geographic information systems technology, the biological review panel determined that gopher tortoise numbers have declined by more than 50% over a span of time equaling three tortoise generations (average age of breeding adults). This rate of decline meets the criteria for listing in the "threatened" species category.

If the recommendation for reclassifying the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is approved, will this mean that gopher tortoises will receive more protection?

Not necessarily. Any species moving on, off or within the list requires a species-specific management plan to be approved that suggests species-specific regulations required for the continued protection of the species, when appropriate. This plan will address a host of issues relating to gopher tortoise conservation including permitting, law enforcement, habitat protection and habitat management. Since no management plan currently exists for the gopher tortoise, even if the species is not reclassified as threatened, a management plan will be developed and appropriate protections will be incorporated.

What is the Gopher Tortoise 2 Team?

The FWC recognized the need to re-evaluate its gopher tortoise management and policies. As a result, the Gopher Tortoise 2 Team was assembled with industry, stakeholder and other interest groups to look at new approaches on agency gopher tortoise policies and management.

Will a revised permit system include entombment of tortoises?

The Gopher Tortoise 2 Team is looking at a totally revamped permit system that eliminates or significantly minimizes entombment.

GENERAL QUESTIONS ON THE LISTING PROCESS

What are the current criteria used for listing species in the state of Florida?

The FWC listing process is driven by Florida-specific data and clear standards consisting of measurable biological criteria, peer reviewed by panels of experts, agreed upon by FWC's Commissioners, and strengthened by species-specific management plans that are tailored to the unique conditions and needs of each species. To view the criteria, see the definition section of the condensed rules at:

<http://myfwc.com/imperiledspecies/listingproceduresanddefinitions.pdf>

What is the FWC's listing process and how does it work?

The listing process is a petition-initiated process the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) uses to classify imperiled wildlife species in Florida. There are three imperiled species classifications: endangered, threatened, and species of special concern. The imperiled species list classifications identify those species facing the greatest risk of extinction, they do not dictate the level of protection a species receives.

The process follows this outline:

- An external or internal individual or group can petition to have a species classification reviewed.
- Once the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission accepts a petition, a team of FWC biologists and non-FWC professionals conduct a biological status review following the FWC's listing process.
- The biological status review team is comprised of 3, 5, or 7 biological and professional experts, most of which are not with the FWC.
- The classification recommendations are peer reviewed by other biologists to see if they agree.
- The peer-reviewed classification recommendations are presented before the FWC's Commissioners at a meeting open to the public.
- If the recommendation is accepted, a detailed management plan and recommended rule changes for each species are developed, with public input, to guide species recovery.
- No change in status will occur until the FWC's Commissioners approve the management plan and vote on species-specific rules recommended in the plan. Development of the plan can take more than a year.

Why does the FWC use this listing process?

From 1972 through 1999, Florida's listing process was an intuitive process with no fixed criteria and no standardized formal review process. There was no listing process rule, the definitions were considered somewhat vague, and listing actions were done through rule changes.

Questions were raised on this process and the Game and Freshwater Fish Commission (GFC) agreed to improve it. At that time, the GFC implemented a self-imposed moratorium on listing actions from 1994 until a new process would be approved.

In 1998, the GFC appointed an 11-member stakeholder panel (a mix of environmental, development, agricultural and recreational user groups) to review the issues and provide a list of desired characteristics for a listing process.

Staff used the stakeholder input to draft the process, which was adopted in 1999, and supported by the stakeholders with no major objections. The 1999 process was adopted by the GFC just prior to the constitutionally mandated merger, and therefore did not address marine species. As a result, the newly formed FWC reconvened the Stakeholder Panel in September 2002 with new marine membership to address concerns during implementation of the 1999 process and new marine issues the agency faced, and issued a moratorium on reviewing listed species.

As a result in April 2005, the FWC adopted the new IUCN criteria, the IUCN regional guidelines, and other modifications, which have been tested by the scientific community worldwide. In fact, at least 30 countries are using IUCN standards as the basis for their own imperiled species classification process.

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When will the biological status reviews be completed?

The final peer-reviewed biological status review of the bald eagle, Florida manatee, gopher tortoise and Panama City crayfish are to be presented at the June 2006 meeting of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Will all biological status reviews be identical?

No. The biology, life history and available data on each species vary greatly. Species experts, both within and outside of the FWC, will use the best available science, data and information for each species review. In addition, the reviews will consider the unique risks each species faces so that the appropriate imperilment category is identified. To strengthen this review recommendation, all information and findings will be evaluated by different independent scientists to ensure that the biological review panel made sound science-based decisions/recommendations.

If the FWC's Commissioners decide that a reclassification change is warranted, when will this change occur?

The status change for any species will occur only after a species management plan is developed, professionally and publicly reviewed, and accepted by the FWC's Commissioners. The development of a species management plan can take more than a year.

What does it mean if a species is reclassified from "endangered" to "threatened?"

A reclassification from "endangered" to "threatened" means that a species is no longer in imminent danger of extinction, but still has a very high risk of extinction. It also means that the species' biological data no longer meet the criteria for endangered, but they do meet the criteria for threatened.

If a species is reclassified, does it mean that species protections change?

It could. The classification categories in Florida's listed species rule describe the relative risk of extinction, not level of protection. The protections for any reclassified species will be defined in a species-specific management plan that guides species recovery.

Why is the FWC evaluating the status of the bald eagle, gopher tortoise, manatee and Panama City crayfish?

The FWC received petitions to assess the status of the bald eagle, gopher tortoise, manatee, and Panama City crayfish from 2001-03. In April 2005, the listing process was updated and the Commission directed staff to evaluate

these species under the new listing process rules. All four biological status reviews are expected to be completed in June 2006.