

GOPHER TORTOISE-WLFW PRIORITY AREAS FOR CONSERVATION (PACs)

The following STEPs comprise a range-wide approach for PAC development for the gopher tortoise (GT), as determined by the attending group of experts [NRCS, USFWS and State wildlife agencies] at a meeting held at the Jones Ecological Restoration Center in Georgia in March of 2016.

STEP 1: Soils – We plan to have an updated NRCS soils assessment for what is suitable, marginal and unsuitable for GT by May; all Primary and Secondary PACs will be in suitable soils.

STEP 2: Land Cover – We will use FRAGSTATS and the National Land Cover Database (NLCD) to assess suitable cover types and the landscape connectivity of those types for GT

<http://www.umass.edu/landeco/research/fragstats/documents/Metrics/Metrics%20TOC.htm>

STEP 3: Population/Survey Information – Once we have narrowed the landscape to suitable soils and landcover, we will further focus using available GT population survey data. We have an MVP evaluation done by GT experts (including Federal, State and academics) that says GT MVP = 250 adults (1:1 sex ratio). We will use the distribution of known MVPs and support populations (populations < 250 tortoises) as the final GIS layer in outlining Primary and Secondary PACs. In this manner, each State will have Primary and/or Secondary PACs that overlap their geography, and we will still achieve the goal of landscape prioritization across the species' range. *[Note: The Gopher Tortoise Council and/or individual states may pursue development of additional Geographic Areas of Significance (GASs) that will augment PACs developed at the range-wide scale; NRCS will only apply the range-wide PACs to guide WLFW resource allocation due to the need for a consistent methodology and for landowner fairness across the 6-state range.]*

PAC Details - Matt Hinderliter (USFWS GT species lead) will continue to lead this mapping/modeling effort. Matt is blocking off significant time in April-May to develop WLFW/GT partnership PACs. We further pre-identified 6 additional technical experts from 3 agencies who can serve as an informal technical support team.

Regarding THREATS, in 2014 USFWS R4 published a Strategic Plan for the GT and in it they identified Habitat Loss and Degradation of Private Lands as the single greatest THREAT to GT. Furthermore, other THREATS listed in that document were not ones that could be addressed by NRCS programs (disease, road kills, predation, illegal collection, etc.). Therefore, WLFW'S focus within the PACs will be on habitat establishment, restoration and management on private lands (currently primarily through Rx fire and tree planting); FWS, DOD, States and other partners/partnerships will focus on both private and non-private lands within PACs (and possible GASs). Leading up to the STC's Investment Strategy Meeting for GT, we will have an assessment of the percent private lands and number of acres of private land within each PAC in each State.