

Gopher Tortoise, Listed as Candidate Species of Concern:

The Gopher Tortoise (GOTO) was listed as federally threatened in the western most portion of its range (west of Mobile and Tombigbee Rivers in AL, MS, and LA) in 1987. It is a candidate for listing in the remaining portion of its range. While the GOTO federal status is being assessed, a Candidate Conservation Agreement has been developed to proactively implement conservation measures across its eastern range. In South Carolina, the GOTO is listed as state endangered.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1987-07-07/pdf/FR-1987-07-07.pdf#page=40>

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-11-16/pdf/2020-24198.pdf#page=1>

<https://www.fws.gov/southeast/pdf/agreement/candidate-conservation-agreement/gopher-tortoise.pdf>

Gopher Tortoise Range in North America:

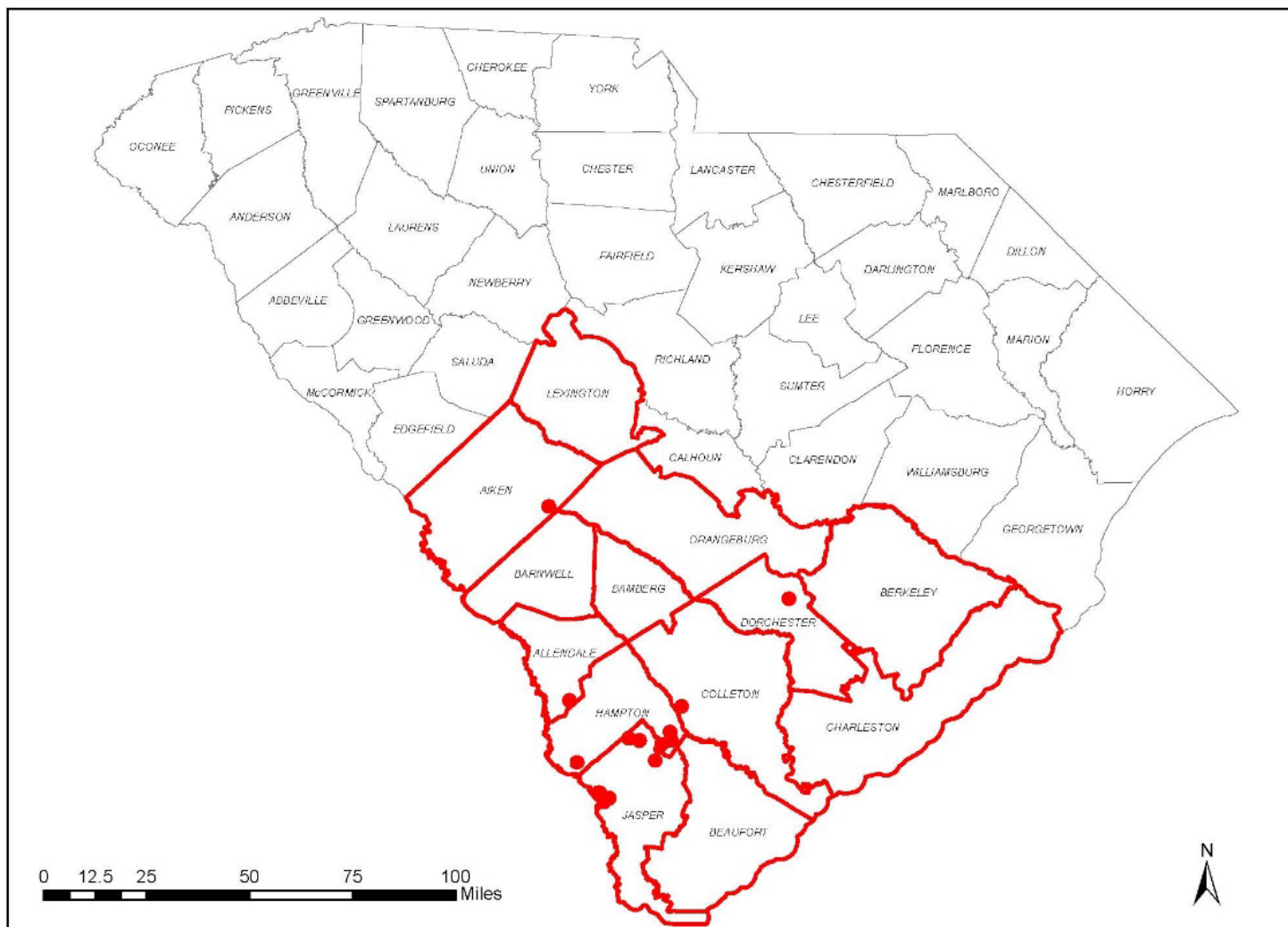
This map shows the GOTO range in North America.

<https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/6994>



Gopher Tortoise Range in South Carolina:

This map shows the GOTO range overlain with occurrences recorded by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR).



Primary Conservation Provision, Protect Burrows within GOTO Range:

GOTO use their burrows for many years. Check the T&E database in Desktop and work with an NRCS biologist to determine if your project area might contain GOTO.

- Protect known burrows and survey for new ones in areas of potential habitat if any significant ground disturbing activities are planned (best to survey immediately after a burn when aprons are more obvious).
- Maintain at least a 15-foot radius buffer zone around all known burrows, active or inactive, where heavy equipment will be used.

Practices That Can Help:

Prescribed Burning

- Burning should be implemented on a 1-3 year cycle.
- Growing Season Burns more effectively control undesirable hardwoods and are the long term fire regime goal.
- Dormant Season Burns may be needed initially if fire has been excluded and there are high fuel loads. Alternatively, they can also be used if the area has lost its dry fine fuels (e.g., grasses, forbs, pine needles, and leaves), where the dormant biomass provides adequate fuels.

Site Preparation

- Protect burrows and maintain forage plants by avoiding heavy mechanical site preparation such as shearing, root-raking, bedding, disking, and piling in occupied areas (especially in the growing season when nesting).
- Broadcast applications of a broad-spectrum herbicide can reduce forage in the short term while selective herbicides can offer good control of weedy plants.

Planting

- Hand-planting is preferred because it creates less disturbance to the site.
- If using a mechanical planter, the blade should be set to barely skim the soil surface.
- Avoid the immediate vicinity of burrow entrances and aprons with all heavy equipment.

Activities Around Burrows

- Locate heavy equipment operations away from known and visibly apparent burrows, and be cautious of tortoises.
- Carefully remove and reduce woody and invasive vegetation from around burrows using spot treatments.
- Mark burrows with stakes or flagging and maintain a buffer of at least 15 feet around burrows before any activity.
- Minimize use of heavy equipment during September and October since hatchlings may be around burrows.

Mid-Story Hardwood and Invasives Control

- For chemicals, use a selective herbicide with spot treatments to control woody competition with minimal impact.
- Once habitat is restored by mechanical or chemical methods, habitat should then be maintained by prescribed fire.

Timber Thinning

- Thin to allow about 50% of the ground to be sunlit during the middle of the day.
- Harvest during drier periods and/or use low-pressure tires.

Ground Cover Restoration

- Native species should be used wherever possible to meet practice objectives and gopher tortoise needs.
- Seed mixes should be State-certified, meeting the appropriate State certification criteria.
- Consider roller chopping over mulching/shredding for lands with excessive shrubs, palmettos, or other heavy fuels.
- If mulching or shredding is used to reduce excessive shrubs, follow with a burn to reduce any mulch material.

Mowing

- Lands dominated by large pastures/fields can be maintained by mowing or bush hogging, when fire cannot be used.
- Set mower blades at least 18 inches above the ground to avoid injury to tortoises.
- Stay at least 15 feet from known gopher tortoise burrow entrances.
- Smaller hand mowers can be used near the burrow as long as the burrow entrance and apron are not disturbed.

(The above guidance is adapted from: <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/pdf/guidelines/recommended-habitat-management-guidelines-for-the-gopher-tortoise-in-longleaf-pine-habitat.pdf>)

