



April 13, 2022

Office of Governor Ron DeSantis
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis,

We wish to express our wholehearted support for creation of a new specialty license plate dedicated to gopher tortoise conservation through signature of Senate Bill 364, the Specialty License Plates Bill. This initiative represents a meaningful opportunity for citizens to engage in protecting one of Florida's most beloved and important wildlife species.

Since its founding in 1978, the Gopher Tortoise Council (www.gophertortoisecouncil.org) has been a guiding force in informing management and conservation efforts for this imperiled species throughout its range in the southeastern U.S. The majority of our members reside in the State of Florida, which is considered a stronghold for the gopher tortoise. Nevertheless, gopher tortoises in Florida continue to be adversely affected by the ongoing destruction of critical upland habitats. In addition, scores of gopher tortoises are hit and killed by vehicles on Florida roadways every year. Given the rapid human population growth projected to occur in coming decades, we urgently need to expand education and conservation initiatives for gopher tortoises to ensure their survival.

The fate of a host of other animals is inextricably linked to that of the gopher tortoise and its sandy upland habitats. Hundreds of other species – including the Florida mouse, gopher frog, and eastern indigo snake – rely in some way on the deep burrows created by tortoises. For this reason, the gopher tortoise is a 'keystone species' whose extirpation has cascading negative effects on upland pine ecosystems. For example, a study conducted by University of Central Florida researchers found significantly lower diversity of vertebrate animals in sandhill habitats having lower densities of gopher tortoise burrows [Catano & Stout (2015) *Biodiversity and Conservation* 24(8):1957-1974].

We believe having a tortoise license plate would provide an enormous boost to gopher tortoise conservation by generating funding to expand habitat protection, education, and research efforts, as well as enhancing public awareness of how this species contributes to our shared natural legacy. Thus, we respectfully request your support of a bill to create this specialty plate.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Cozad and Matt Elliott
Co-Chairs, Gopher Tortoise Council
P.O. Box 241 Safety Harbor, FL 34695