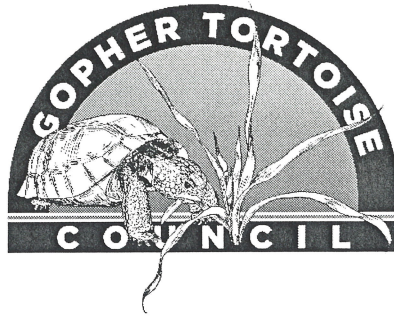




14 October 2020

The Gopher Tortoise Council is a non-profit organization formed in 1978 by a group of biologists and concerned citizens. Council goals are to seek protection of the gopher tortoise and other upland species not only in Florida, but throughout the southeastern United States. In addition, the Council offers advice on management and conservation of lands inhabited by tortoises and a multitude of listed and common species.

We are extremely concerned about the proposed expansion of roads through sensitive wildlife habitat under the Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) program. The gopher tortoise is currently protected as a Threatened species in the state of Florida; tortoises near roads slated for road widening and/or new construction must be relocated to recipient sites as established under rules of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). As development continues throughout the state it becomes increasingly difficult and more costly to find willing landowners with suitable habitat to accommodate gopher tortoises and other displaced species. Development of major highway corridors and their infrastructure fragments remaining habitat causing isolation of populations, further threatening the persistence of the species. Additionally, state and federal agencies in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama, along with representatives from top ecological research centers and universities in the Southeast, are currently working to protect and enhance habitat to prevent federal listing of the gopher tortoise in the eastern portion of its range.

The recovery of the gopher tortoise is dependent on the existence of viable populations on managed habitat throughout the range. North central Florida populations are critical to this recovery. Expansion of existing roads and creation of new roads severely impact the ability of public and private land managers to safely conduct prescribed burns needed to maintain and improve wildlife habitat and to reduce risk of wildfires, primarily because of smoke concerns.

We ask that the Florida Dept. of Transportation carefully examine whether road expansion/construction is truly needed in areas under consideration by the M-CORES program and ensure the full economic and ecological impacts are factored into these decisions.

Respectfully,

Jeffrey M. Goessling, PhD, Gopher Tortoise Council Co-chair

On behalf of the Executive Committee of the Gopher Tortoise Council

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The Gopher Tortoise Council is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.