

Gopher tortoises are in trouble but won't get federal protection

July 27 2011, By Kevin Spear

The long-awaited message from federal authorities Tuesday to a shrinking population of gopher tortoises: Sorry, but we don't have the time and money to protect you.

U.S. Fish and [Wildlife officials](#) said the ailing gopher [tortoise](#), declining in Florida and elsewhere in the Southeast because of land development and poor management of conservation lands, probably is at risk of extinction.

But the reptile won't be declared a threatened species without further review - and that won't happen soon because the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) said it can't afford the time or expense and is tied up by court-ordered actions on behalf of other species.

"This determination does mean we believe the species needs to be listed, but we do not have the resources to pursue the listing," said Cynthia Dohner, the agency's southeast regional director. "We know the gopher tortoise population is in trouble."

The agency decided to classify the tortoise as one of nearly 250 "candidate" species, which federal officials can try to protect by encouraging voluntary help from property owners. Dohner stressed that land developers face no additional regulations because of the candidate status.

Laurie Ann Macdonald, director of Defenders of Wildlife in Florida,

said her group is pleased the Fish and Wildlife Service recognized perils faced by tortoises.

"We would like to see them move very, very quickly to listing this critically important species," Macdonald said.

Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission praised the federal agency for holding off from listing tortoises as threatened so that the state can pursue its own remedies.

The state, which listed the reptiles as threatened in 2007, has put in place a "model conservation program for tortoises," said Deborah Burr, the commission's tortoise coordinator.

Federal protections often bring powerful land-use regulations, while state protections often focus on recovery strategies, such as improving conservation lands for an imperiled species.

Steve Godley, biologist and representative for the Florida Home Builders Association, said he thinks the reptiles will be listed as federally threatened eventually, but it doesn't have to happen immediately.

"They are not going to blink out overnight," Godley said. "They live to be 60 or 80 or who knows how long."

Through the late 2000s, Florida officials allowed construction to entomb nearly 80,000 tunnel-dwelling tortoises rather than deal with the extra time and cost of moving them.

Paying as much as \$1,000 per tortoise, developers in Orange and Osceola counties led the state in obtaining permits. The practice was criticized as "pay to pave," and the revenue was called "blood money."

Janet Mizzi, Fish and Wildlife Service regional chief for endangered species, said the tortoise could remain a candidate [species](#) for some time because its threats aren't as immediately pressing as for other troubled wildlife.

"It's fairly low down on the list," Mizzi said. "It would take us quite a few years."

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