

New strategy offers hope for Florida's gopher tortoises

April 23 2012, By Kevin Spear

Florida's approach to saving gopher tortoises from extinction a decade ago allowed developers to bury the docile reptiles alive in their burrows in return for what critics called "blood money" that was used to buy and protect tortoise habitat elsewhere.

Thousands of [tortoises](#) a year were sentenced to death at the height of Florida's building boom. Opposition from environmentalists and animal-rights advocates finally brought a halt to the state's "pay to pave" program in 2007 - just as the nationwide housing slump and Great Recession brought a halt to most new construction, anyway.

Now, as development throughout the state starts to show signs of recovery, nearly five years after government-sanctioned tortoise deaths were ended, defenders of the reptile say it is better off, though they don't yet know if the state's new approach of relocating tortoises when they get in the way will ultimately save the creatures from oblivion.

"The main thing is they are not being buried anymore," said Matt Aresco, a Florida Panhandle [ecologist](#) who led opposition to the "entombment" of tortoises. "And the second thing is they are being put on protected sites."

The [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation](#) Commission allows developers to move tortoises that are blocking construction just a short distance to an undisturbed area of the same development tract. Most of the time, though, developers pay the owners of designated ranches,

timberland and other largely natural landscapes to take in tortoises from [construction sites](#).

To get paid for adopting these long-living land dwellers, those landowners must permanently designate their acreage as green space and ensure it remains healthy - not overgrown with brush, for example - as tortoise habitat.

Deborah Burr, the state wildlife agency's tortoise coordinator, said the state's relocation policy for tortoises appears to be working, at least if it's judged by the high survival rate of those animals moved to new turf.

One reason for that high rate, she said, is that the transplanted tortoises must be fenced in for several months until they adapt to their new surroundings. Without that added measure, Burr said, "They'll walk themselves to death to get back to where they came from."

Burr said that, apart from a \$300 permit fee, the cost to relocate a tortoise can vary considerably. But typically it includes \$500 for catching, transporting and releasing the animal, and a \$1,000 payment to the owner of the relocation site.

"There is a potential to make a profit," Burr said, and that has led to a substantial increase in the amount of protected green space in Florida set aside for tortoises. Nearly 20 private parcels with more than 5,000 acres combined now offer sanctuary to as many as 7,800 relocated tortoises.

Recently, a crew used a backhoe to unearth 19 tortoises from a site where Orange County intends to expand its McCormick Road wastewater plant. State rules require tortoises to be relocated within the same region, so the 19 were taken to the Adams Ranch in south Osceola County.

A backhoe has become the standard tool for relocations; it's large enough to remove tons of sand but, in the hands of a skilled operator, delicate enough to follow the twists and turns of a turtle's burrow without hurting the animal.

"You never know where the burrow is going to go - so you have to be careful," said Liz Barker, an environmental consultant overseeing the Orange County job.

Legal entombment, which began in the early 1990s, typically cost a developer \$1,000 for a permit to bury a gopher tortoise. In 2006, the state's wildlife agency authorized entombment of 12,690 tortoises and the relocation of another 4,436. In 2007, when Florida stopped issuing entombment, or "incidental-take," permits midway through the year, 6,867 incidental-take and 11,222 relocation permits were issued.

Development activity plunged with the start of the Great Recession in December 2007, giving Florida a chance to refine the new relocation policy, Aresco said. The number of tortoise relocations permitted fell to fewer than 6,000 in 2008, fewer than 4,000 in 2009 and fewer than 3,000 in 2010.

Only last year did the number begin to edge up, to 4,564.

"The key is having enough protected areas ready when development starts to kick in again," Aresco said.

Florida's tortoises number in the hundreds of thousands. But experts aren't as concerned about an exact head count as they are the rate of decline. That's difficult to determine, because tortoises can live as long as 60 years and are among the slowest of Florida's wildlife to reach breeding age: Females might not produce eggs until more than 20 years old.

The state classified tortoises as threatened in 2007, the year entombments ended. Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said that, though the species is at risk of extinction, the agency doesn't have enough money to declare it threatened, as well. And federal wildlife-protection law is significantly more powerful than Florida's.

Though relocated tortoises appear willing to settle down wherever they are placed - once they complete their stay behind a fence - experts still don't know whether they will simply live out their lives in their new homes or establish thriving populations to help the imperiled species recover.

"That's a very tough question," Burr said. "Gopher tortoises live for so long that you.

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