

# **GOPHER TORTOISE CONSERVATION INITIATIVE™**

## **FACT SHEET FOR DEVELOPERS**

The Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative (GTCI) is a program of Ashton Biodiversity Research & Preservation Institute, Inc., a non-profit 501C-3 organization. The primary goal of GTCI is to provide advice, training, and assistance to members who are stakeholders in tortoise and uplands conservation and who are decision makers for lands with tortoise habitat or other protected species. Developers are frequently impacted economically and in scheduling and ability to obtain permits for conceptual plans by gopher tortoise issues.

### **Who does this program serve?**

GTCI provides advice, information and assistance to people who are changing land use for development purposes and who have a legal responsibility for protected species that occur on that land. Information and creative solutions can benefit both developers and gopher tortoise conservation.

### **What Can GTCI Do for MEMBERS Who Are Developers?**

- 1) Provide Pertinent Information on Gopher Tortoise Issues, Problems, and Regulations and on Available Resources for Seeking Solutions
- 2) Provide Advice on Working with Agencies
- 3) Assist or Recommend Experts to Assist in Evaluation of Property and Development and Implementation of Creative Solutions (for reasonable fees)
- 4) Recommend consultants that have been trained and that have agreed to carry out projects in an ethical manner.

### **How can the Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative Help Members?**

GTCI is a program that provides information, helps to explain regulations, and can help create solutions in the most cost and conservation effective manner. The GTCI staff has years of experience in developing innovative ways of meeting regulations and requirements by working with agency personnel. Through evaluation and consultations, GTCI can work with the landowner, developer and consultants already on the job. GTCI staff is made up of tortoise biologists who are concerned about developing appropriate cost effective solutions. GTCI can also recommend environmental consultants who have demonstrated that they are qualified and can produce cost effective services.

## **Concerns for Land Developers**

### **Are there protected species on the property to be developed?**

Landowners or developers are responsible for determining if the property being developed sustains individuals or groups of protected state and federally listed species. This is not only required by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) but, depending on the county and the size of the property and development, the information may be required by other state and county agencies. This information usually must be filed with applications for various development permits. It is better to complete this determination early, before creating a site plan, or when considering the purchase of the property. Poorly completed surveys that confuse other types of burrows with tortoise burrows are a frequent problem for developers, holding up permits and increasing anticipated mitigation costs.

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### **Have you considered protected species mitigation in your site plan?**

The most cost effective way to handle development site mitigation requirements for protected species (wetlands and other environmental concerns) is to determine what species you have and where, **before you create your site plan**. This will give you and your planners more leeway in evaluating how to develop your plan in a manner that may save land and money. This is also the best time to get protected species expertise on your team.

### **Will you need to develop a habitat management plan or negotiate off-site mitigation with state and local agencies?**

This can be determined when creating the site plan, if you have done your homework regarding protected species on the property. A number of options may be available regarding mitigation. If there are a number of protected species on the property, on-site plans can be developed that will work within green space and recreation areas. In some cases it may be best to negotiate a mitigation fee and obtain an incidental take permit. A point to remember: the marketing team of a large Central Florida developer discovered that potential homebuyers were as interested in having homes on biological preserves as in having homes on golf courses.

### **How do you obtain the protected species permits from the appropriate agencies?**

Start early. It is very important to understand the time it takes to get permits and agreements. Your expert should be knowledgeable enough to give you a rough time frame. It may take anywhere from 30 to 90 days to obtain permits to carry out mitigation. This may hold up land clearing and other activities on site.

### **How do you fulfill a mitigation obligation?**

This will depend on the protected species present, how many you have, and the type of habitat. It will also depend on where the land is located in the state. You will have many options in some cases. It should be noted here that when developing mitigation plans, working with FWC can be extremely confusing at best. There is room for negotiations and discussion. This is where early planning pays off. It should be noted that a good consultant can be helpful in developing innovative ways that are cost effective and protect wildlife at the same time. If the consultant has a bad reputation with agencies, you may find that they have less capability in negotiating and developing a plan successfully.

### **How can GTCI be of assistance?**

GTCI staff can assist members by doing a cursory site visit to tell member landowners what species they may have on the property and provide suggestions as to possible methods of mitigation. GTCI is developing a list (to provide to members) of environmentally friendly biological consultants, land clearers and other service providers that work with gopher tortoises and other uplands species. These people will have completed GTCI workshops or demonstrated appropriate practices on projects in the past.

## **MEMBERSHIPS**

Individuals or Development Firms can become members of GTCI. As part of the application process, individuals or a representative of a company must agree to comply with regulations and appropriate conservation practices related to gopher tortoises and upland conservation. Members get priorities on spaces in training programs and the opportunity to participate in programs for members only. (see attached membership form)