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## The Gopher Tortoise Council and its Role in Conserving an Ancient Reptile

By Richard Franz, Co-Chairperson, Gopher Tortoise Council

The gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) is a type of turtle that dwells in the dry coastal pinelands, from southeastern South Carolina and Florida to eastern Louisiana. This tortoise has living relatives in the southwestern United States and in Mexico. These western gophers include several desert tortoises, Texas tortoise, and Bolson tortoise, which inhabit dry habitats, including the Chihuahuan, Sonoran, and Mohave deserts.

Gopher tortoise ancestry extends back at least 32 million years to a time in the late Eocene when North America was emerging from wet

tropical forest conditions to much drier grasslands and scrub forests. These early fossils look much like modern-day gophers except for subtle differences in their skulls and skeletons. The development of the newer innovations are ascribed to more efficient digging capabilities, which allowed them to produce more extensive burrows.

The fossil record suggests that at least 30 named taxa of gopher tortoises occurred in the xeric environments from southern Canada into central Mexico since the Eocene. Gophers are home-grown turtles that lived their entire ancestral history



Thanks to the efforts of the Gopher Tortoise Council and conservation partners, this reptile's population is on a road to recovery.

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in North America, and no place else. They are thought to have evolved from more primitive forest tortoises (genus *Hadrianus*), which originally made their way here from Eurasia, via an early Arctic pathway.

### Imperiled Status

In the 1960s, Walter Auffenberg, Curator of Herpetology at the Florida Museum of Natural History, began population studies on gopher tortoises in Alachua County. Seeing local declines in the species, Walt began probing out beyond local sites to areas in the eastern Florida panhandle. To his astonishment, Walt encountered huge piles of gopher tortoise shells that had been butchered for food along rural panhandle roads. In response, Walt was given a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate the status of the tortoise throughout its range. I joined him in this study in 1974. This study not only defined the geographic and environmental distributions of this tortoise, but also focused on its conservation status. It became obvious to us that this turtle and its habitat were imperiled.

### Seeds of a Conservation Campaign

The organizational meeting of the infant Gopher Tortoise Council (GTC)

occurred in spring 1978, as part of the All-Florida Herpetology Conference, sponsored by Ray Ashton and the Florida Museum of Natural History and held on the University of Florida campus. The unpredictable Walt Auffenberg was scheduled to talk at this meeting about his latest research on Komodo dragons, but stopped mid-stream at the podium, saying, "No, I don't want to talk about dragons, I want to tell you about the demise of the local gopher tortoise." His talk was so impassioned that the audience gave him a standing ovation. That evening a small group of us met at the Museum, and Auffenberg laid out his plan for the new organization. The first formal meeting was held in November 1979 in Gainesville in conjunction with the All Florida Herpetology Conference. The Council published its first meeting publication that summarized the research presented at the 2nd Annual Meeting, held in Auburn, AL, in November 1980.

Over the years, a maturing Gopher Tortoise Council established the following guiding principles: (1) to offer professional advice for management, conservation, and protection of gopher tortoises; (2) to encourage the study of the life history, ecology,

behavior, physiology, and management of gopher tortoises and other upland species; (3) to conduct active public information and conservation education programs; and (4) to seek effective protection of the gopher tortoise and other upland species throughout the southeastern United States. To accomplish these ends, the Council established an annual meeting, newsletter, series of scientific and educational awards, student travel grants, and several state-based conservation initiatives.

Two meetings of the GTC took place in January and October 2017 in Palatka, Florida and Aiken, South Carolina, respectively. If you are interested in the conservation of gopher tortoises and their habitats, check out the GTC website, <http://www.gophertortoisecouncil.org/>, for information about upcoming meetings and the Council's work.

## Florida Tree Farmers: Time for a Five-year Inspection?



The Florida Tree Farm Program requests that certified Tree farmers, who have been certified in the American Tree Farm System for *five years*, contact a Tree Farm inspector to have their Tree Farm re-inspected. All Tree Farms must be inspected every five years in order to verify activity and maintain the credibility of the Program. We very much appreciate your help with the five-year inspection process.

**Find your Tree Farm District Representative** at <https://www.treefarmssystem.org/about-fl>.

Your Florida Forest Service County Forester can help with the inspection as well.

**Find your County Forester** at <http://www.freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service/For-Landowners/County-Foresters>

## 'Tis the Season of Disking for our Northern Bobwhite Quail

By Don Buchanan, Landowner Assistance Biologist, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

As we enter the season of Thanks and Giving, I'd like to bring your attention to a gift you can give to our Northern bobwhite quail populations over the holidays. Bobwhite quail populations across Florida have dropped by about 80 percent over the past 50 years. The same has happened over the entire bobwhite range in the U.S., with a loss of an estimated 25 million quail. Changes in farm and forestry practices have left little room for bobwhites here in the panhandle. Old fields that once provided nesting and escape cover either have been planted in pine plantations or are being farmed fence row to fence row. Even with favorable weather conditions for bobwhite quail nesting success, as seen this past year, the overall population will not grow without improving quail habitat.

This winter, you can help improve your bobwhite quail habitat in the panhandle by setting aside some time to disk strips in forests and fields. Disking opens up dense vegetation and promotes growth of new vegetation beneficial to quail and other wildlife. Strip disking during the winter months (December through February) is a wildlife land management tool that benefits quail by encouraging the growth of plants that are valuable to quail such as ragweed, partridge pea, beggar-weed and blackberries. These weedy plants provide both food and cover for bobwhite quail.



Strip disking also opens the vegetation at ground level, creating the needed bare areas that quail need for travel and feeding.

What is strip disking? It is essentially what it says it is, a "lightly" disked strip of land that is at least 10 to 15 feet wide. This isn't like disking a food plot. In fact, no more than two passes by a tractor or ATV with a disk are needed for a single strip and only 2 to 5 inches of soil should be turned up, exposing no more than 50 percent of bare ground. The strip disking technique can be applied along farm trails and firebreaks, and around the edges of fallow fields. Ideally, these strips should be located as close as possible to the bobwhite quail's escape cover such as a shrubby fence row or plum thicket or nesting

cover next to native warm season grasses.

So as December rolls around, if you're looking to get away from the hustle and bustle of the holidays or need a reason to spend an afternoon in the field, join the landowners who are setting aside time to increase habitat for bobwhite quail in Florida. If you have any question about strip disking or would like some assistance with how you can use this wildlife technique on your property, go to <http://myfwc.com/conservation/special-initiatives/lap/> to contact a Landowner Assistance Program biologist with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, or consult a Certified Wildlife Biologist® in your area.



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## ACF Consultant's Corner: Prescribed Burn Associations in Florida?

By Harper E. Hanway, Association of Consulting Foresters, Southern Forestry Consultants, Inc.

Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs) are localized groups of landowners that work together to conduct prescribed burning on each other's properties. Landowners in these associations commonly share resources (equipment, knowledge, man power) in hopes of conducting prescribed burns more efficiently.

A vast majority (50+) of the PBAs are concentrated in the states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas. To my knowledge, only one PBA has been formed in the Southeast to-date and is located in North Carolina. Based on my review of PBA location maps and a selection of PBAs' average acreage per burn,

most of the burning acreage that has been conducted by PBAs is on rangelands comprised mainly of grasses and few trees. The fuel types, fuel loads, and timber resources in the Southeast, and Florida specifically, are dramatically different than that of Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, and most

Continued on next page



A key objective of prescribed burn associations is to make sure that prescribed fire is carried out with due diligence to smoke management and containment. Photo by Renee Bodine.

of Texas. These factors, in my professional opinion, make prescribed burning more challenging in southeastern states.

The ability to control and manipulate a burn without negatively impacting timber growth takes years of experience. Some of the best burn managers that I know have years of experience, managed hundreds of burns, and know the limitations of each crew member.

Regardless of the state that you are prescribed burning in, the main goal is containment - preventing the fire from "escaping" to another area or property. Fire practitioners in the Southeast are also tasked with protecting the timber resources of the burn unit, and neighboring lands, which may be valued in the thousands of dollars per acre. To put it in perspective, it is common to burn a 100 acre block that has \$200,000 of timber or more.

Most of my research indicates that PBAs are safely conducting burns. Please note that almost all of the research data has been collected from rangeland burning, with little available data on PBAs in the Southeast. While I appreciate the concept of PBAs, one must question what impacts PBAs will have on prescribed burning in Florida and the entire Southeast. Florida arguably has the best burn program in the country with more acres burned annually

than any other state. The Florida Association of Consulting Foresters and the Florida Forest Service have expressed valid concerns about the development of PBAs in Florida. The concerns are many, with public safety and Florida's prescribed burning program being the apex concerns.

Many of you have attended Florida Prescribed Fire Council meetings and fire training classes that have stressed the importance of smoke management. I hear the statement "it just takes one prescribed fire smoke-related accident to change Florida's burning laws" time and time again at Fire Council meetings. This statement is absolute and pertains to everyone who burns in Florida!

As a consulting forester and Florida Certified Prescribed Burn Manager who depends on prescribed burning for a variety of reasons, I am also concerned about the impacts PBAs may have on Florida's exemplary prescribed burning program. I believe that most support more acreage being burned on private property *safely*.

The development of Florida PBAs will be closely monitored by many. Floridians are relying on the PBAs' members and their associates to protect our prescribed burning program which our natural ecosystems and wildlife depend on.

#### Editorial sidebar

A meeting of the northeast/central Florida PBA effort took place in August of 2017. It was attended by landowners, consultants, agency foresters and biologists, and representatives from several other organizations. A representative of the Florida Forestry Association shared the concerns expressed in this article and asked what the overall driving objective of the PBA effort is. The objective was stated by a landowner who has been an active participant in the effort from the start. He said that a PBA would allow landowners to take advantage of favorable burn conditions when Florida Forest Service (FFS) assistance and private contractor capacity is limited. By working together and leveraging resources, equipment, burn certification, and experience they can increase their capacity to burn when FFS and consultants are largely tied up on state lands and existing contracts. The meeting participants moved forward with developing a more formal organizational structure, and it is largely a landowner led and driven effort. It is worth noting that most of these landowners are experienced, certified burners and share the same concerns stated in the article. The FFS, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, University of Florida IFAS, and other partners are staying engaged to make sure this effort has a significant education component going forward, and that all of those involved are operating with due diligence and professionalism.

## Get Email Updates!

Don't miss out on upcoming events and news! A lot happens between issues of this quarterly newsletter. Send an email to [cdemers@ufl.edu](mailto:cdemers@ufl.edu) to be added to the stewardship listserv. Updates are sent every week or two and include the latest calendar of workshops, tours and other events, a link to the current issue of this newsletter, updates on cost-share and other assistance programs and resources, and other stewardship related information.

# TIMBER PRICE UPDATE

The timber pricing information below is useful for observing trends over time, but does not reflect current conditions at a particular location. Landowners considering a timber sale are advised to solicit the services of a consulting forester to obtain current local market conditions.

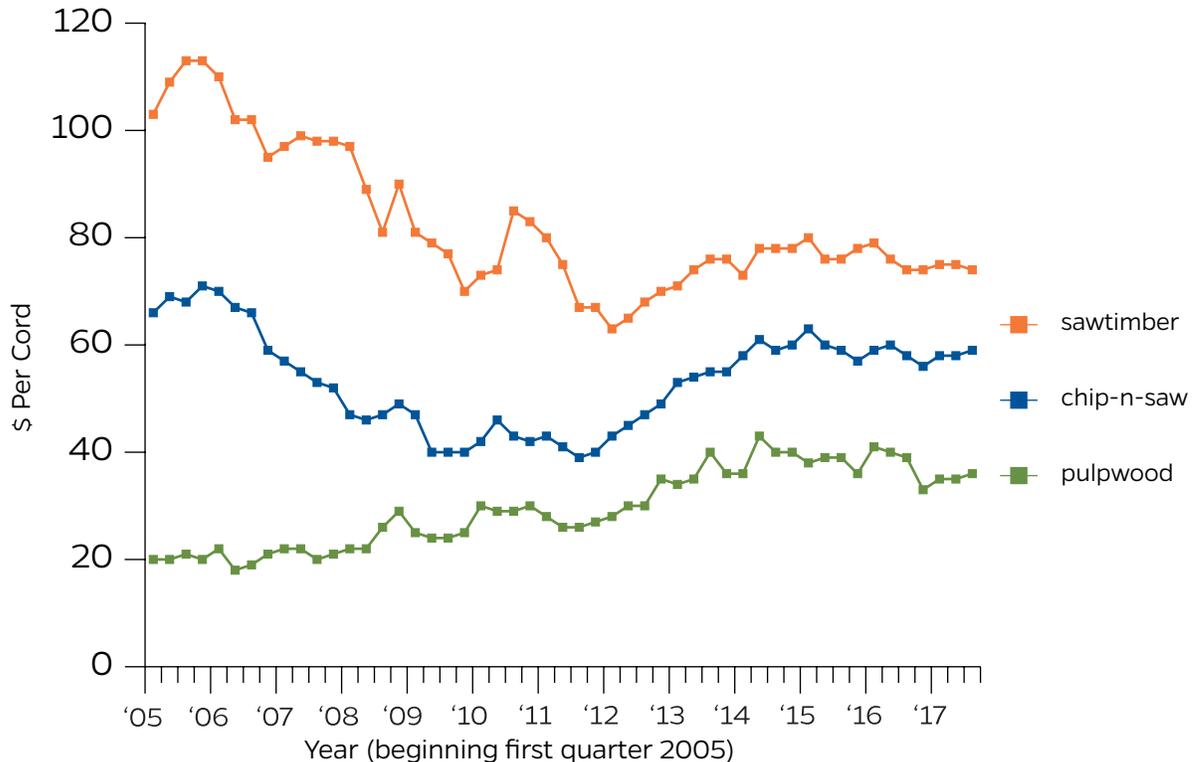
Average stumpage prices for the three major products in Florida, as reported in the **3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2017** Timber Mart-South report were:

Florida Stumpage Prices	
<b>Pine pulpwood:</b>	\$36/cord (\$14/ton), same as 2 <sup>nd</sup> Qtr. 2017
<b>Pine C-N-S:</b>	\$59/cord (\$22/ton), same
<b>Pine sawtimber:</b>	\$74/cord (\$28/ton), same

## Trend Report

Extreme weather events dominated the third quarter of 2017 to say the least. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma brought vast amounts of water to many parts of the region, impacting supply chains and boosting stumpage prices in some areas. These storms caused many facilities to temporarily suspend operations. On average, Florida stumpage prices were not affected. If your timber stands were damaged in a storm, see <https://timbertax.org/> for information on income tax deductions on casualty loss.

**Average Pine Stumpage Prices for Florida  
1<sup>st</sup> Qtr 2005 through 3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr 2017**



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# CONGRATULATIONS

## CERTIFIED FOREST STEWARDS AND TREE FARMERS

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For more information about becoming a Certified Forest Steward or Tree Farmer, contact your Florida Forest Service County Forester, consultant or learn about it at:

<http://www.freshfromflorida.com/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service/For-Landowners/Programs/>

or

<http://www.floridaforest.org>

These landowners have a current Forest Stewardship and/or Tree Farm management plan for their property and have demonstrated excellent stewardship of their land resources.



Gary McClellan (R) with Conrad Wysocki, Putnam County



James and Linda Smith, Gadsden County

### Upcoming Stewardship, Small Farm and Other Events

Date	Event, Location, Contact
Nov. 15	<b>Florida Tree Farm Tour: Managing Pine Forests for Multiple Goals</b> , Pinkoson Property, Alachua County, 9:30 am to 1 pm. Join us to explore the possibilities upland pine forest management has to offer, learn about sustainable forest and wildlife habitat management, and connect with the local and statewide professionals and resources that are available to assist in your land management. <i>Reserve a space by contacting Dave Conser, Dave.Conser@FreshFromFlorida.com, (352) 395-4927.</i>
Nov. 28 - Dec. 2	<b>FireVision 20/20: A 20 Year Reflection and Look into the Future: 7<sup>th</sup> International Fire Ecology &amp; Management Congress</b> , Buena Vista Palace Resort, Orlando, FL. This event will offer an exciting blend of learning opportunities for fire managers, natural resource professionals, policy and administrative leaders, and the academic and research community. Presentations will feature the latest in research results and applications. <i>See <a href="http://ufefirecongress.org/">http://ufefirecongress.org/</a> for details and registration.</i>
Dec. 13	<b>Cold Tolerant Citrus Production for the Southeastern Coastal Plain</b> , UF/IFAS Suwannee Valley Agricultural Extension Center, Live Oak, FL. <i>See <a href="http://citrusFD.eventbrite.com">http://citrusFD.eventbrite.com</a> for details and registration or contact us at (386) 362-1725.</i>
Jan. 26, 2018	<b>UF/IFAS Extension Workshop: Is a Conservation Easement Right for Your Land?</b> 9:00 am - 2:00 pm, UF/IFAS Extension Osceola County Office, Kissimmee, FL. This workshop will explain how conservation easements work, and the potential benefits to landowners. Conservation easements allow landowners to protect the agricultural and/or conservation uses of their property into the future. Easements can also reduce the amount of estate or inheritance tax that their heirs must pay. They are voluntary agreements that keep land as rangeland, agricultural land, open space or natural habitat. <i>Contact Jessica Sullivan at (321) 697-3040.</i>
March 9	<b>Forest Stewardship Shortcourse</b> 9:00 am to 3:00 pm, Austin Cary Forest, Gainesville, FL. Join us for a day of field and classroom breakout sessions on several topics including forest health, tree identification and timber markets. <i>Details to be posted online and email updates. Contact Chris Demers, (352) 846-2375, cdemers@ufl.edu, for more information.</i>

### For many more events and information see: [floridalandsteward.org](http://floridalandsteward.org)

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**Chris Demers** (editor)  
 UF/IFAS School of Forest Resources & Conservation  
 (352) 846-2375 • [cdemers@ufl.edu](mailto:cdemers@ufl.edu)

**Dr. Michael Andreu** (co-editor)  
 UF/IFAS School of Forest Resources & Conservation  
 (352) 846-0355 • [mandreu@ufl.edu](mailto:mandreu@ufl.edu)

**Dr. Bill Giuliano** (co-editor)  
 UF/IFAS Department of Wildlife Ecology & Conservation  
 (352) 846-0575 • [docg@ufl.edu](mailto:docg@ufl.edu)

**Tony Grossman** (co-editor)  
 Florida Forest Service  
 (850) 414-9907  
[Anthony.Grossman@freshfromflorida.com](mailto:Anthony.Grossman@freshfromflorida.com)

**Morgan Richardson** (co-editor)  
 Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission  
 (850) 800-7360 • [Morgan.Richardson@myfwc.com](mailto:Morgan.Richardson@myfwc.com)

**Jon Gould** (co-editor)  
 Florida Tree Farm Program  
 (205) 991-9435 • [gouldjh@bellsouth.net](mailto:gouldjh@bellsouth.net)