

WILDLIFE:

Air Force base opens gates to homeless gopher tortoises

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Baby gopher tortoise. Photo by Randy Browning, courtesy of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida Panhandle is home to the largest swath of habitat for gopher tortoises in the southeastern United States, but the sprawling tract has historically had few tortoises.

That's about to change.

About 500 gopher tortoises will be moved to Eglin under a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission aimed at saving the species from construction projects.

"Eglin are accepting what is essentially a new species onto their base," said Deborah Burr, who coordinates the commission's gopher tortoise program. "They are unique because they want to restore the species back to the habitat."

The last wildlife survey at Eglin found fewer than a dozen tortoises. The base's population was depleted not by the Air Force, officials say, but by locals hunting them for food.

The gopher tortoise is threatened under Florida law. FWS has also listed the tortoise as threatened in Western states, and it is a candidate species for possible federal listing in Florida, Georgia and southern South Carolina.

Florida regulations require developers who want to build in tortoise habitat to move the animals. But the tortoises going to Eglin come from development permitted prior to the law taking effect in 2007, meaning developers could legally build without moving the species.

Eglin's wildlife chief, Justin Johnson, said he's happy to bring the "zombie tortoises" back from the dead because "it is the right thing to do."

"This is for the greater good," he said.

Eglin has some experience with helping recover endangered species, notably the red-cockaded woodpecker.

Johnson said the tortoise is "a really neat species" whose burrows can serve as homes to other animals. "By opening up to the gopher tortoises, you open the door for other species to prosper, as well," he said.

Eglin's 280,000 acres of gopher tortoise habitat is also located "near the border for where the species becomes threatened," FWS biologist Sean Blomquist said.

In other words, he said, repopulating the area could be "critical" to reviving the species without officially listing it as threatened in its eastern range.

"Really what we are trying to do here is take the species off the list before it gets on the list," he said.

Keeping the tortoise off the list is also good for Eglin, which could have been subject to land-use restrictions if the tortoise became threatened.

Indeed, the impacts that listed species have on military training have become a hot-button issue for House Republicans trying to limit listings ([E&E Daily](#), April 28).

As thanks to Eglin for its efforts, FWS and the state have given the base what's known as a conference opinion document, which will allow the Air Force some flexibility in how it uses its land regardless of the gopher tortoise's listing status.

"We wanted to alleviate any fears they might have, because they are taking on a new species," FWS biologist Patricia Kelly said.

The way Johnson sees it, accepting 500 tortoises isn't just good for the animal and good for his base. If his efforts are successful in helping the species rebound, that could help the 23 other military bases in the Southeast with gopher tortoise habitat.

"This is a lot bigger than Eglin Air Force Base," he said. "The work we are doing here will impact other Department of Defense installations and other gopher tortoise conservation areas."

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