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Apply for New Wildlife Initiative by April 30 for First Ranking Period

JACKSON, Miss., April 24, 2012 – Producers and landowners wanting to improve habitat for gopher tortoises should apply by April 30th. This is the deadline for the first ranking period of the Working Lands for Wildlife Initiative (WLFW).

WLFW is a new initiative offered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS). This new initiative encourages landowners to voluntarily create, restore or enhance gopher tortoise habitat, and increase habitat connectivity which can contribute to the recovery of the tortoise throughout its entire range.

The initiative provides financial assistance through the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) for landowners wanting to protect, maintain and restore longleaf pine forests, the primary habitat of gopher tortoises. Below is a list of targeted counties eligible for funding:

Focal Area Counties

Covington	Jones
Forrest	Lamar
George	Marion
Greene	Pearl River
Hancock	Perry
Harrison	Stone
Jackson	Wayne

WLFW is a national \$33 million partnership between USDA and the Department of Interior. The gopher tortoise is one of seven species poised to benefit from this initiative.

Interested producers and landowners in targeted areas can enroll in WHIP program for WLFW funds on a continuous basis at their local NRCS field office. Applications will be reviewed for each ranking period after each cut-off date. In addition to April 30th, the other cutoff date is May 30, 2012.

Helping People Help the Land

For 14 years, WHIP has worked to protect, restore or develop fish and wildlife habitat for many species, including those considered at-risk. Since 2003, about \$310 million has been committed to 23,000 farmers, ranchers and landowners to provide wildlife treatments on four million acres of private working lands.

The gopher tortoise is considered a keystone species, and an indicator of longleaf pine ecosystem health. The gopher tortoise requires deep, well drained soils and an open understory that provides open sunny sites for nesting. Its burrows provide vital habitat and shelter for many endangered species. In addition, the gopher tortoise serves as vector for seed dispersal, helping to maintain biological diversity.

The effects of habitat destruction, degradation, and human predation have greatly reduced the gopher tortoise population to the point where gopher tortoise is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act throughout the western part of its range.

More than eighty percent of gopher tortoise habitat is in private or corporate ownership. In 2011, NRCS launched the Longleaf Pine Initiative (LLPI) to focus technical and financial resources on increasing longleaf pine habitat. Under the initiative, NRCS and its conservation partners are helping private landowners enhance, restore and protect longleaf pine forests.

Many of the conservation practices that support longleaf pine forest health also benefit the gopher tortoise, including: forest stand improvement, prescribed burning, restoration and management of rare or declining habitats, and tree/shrub establishment. WLFW will provide additional resources to support gopher tortoise recovery, and incorporate a species-based indicator of the success of the LLPI.

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