

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee

BILL: SB 1486

INTRODUCER: Senator Saunders

SUBJECT: State Symbols

DATE: February 22, 2008 REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Kiger	Kiger	EP	Favorable
2.			GO	
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				

I. Summary:

This bill designates the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) as the official state turtle.

This bill creates section 15.0386, Florida Statutes.

II. Present Situation:

Chapter 15, F.S. designates official state emblems. To date, there are designations for a state flag, motto, seal, state tree, state fruit, state beverage, citrus archive, shell, stone, gem, wildflower, play, animal, freshwater fish, saltwater fish, marine mammal, saltwater mammal, butterfly, reptile, air fair, rodeo, festival, moving image center and archive, litter control symbol, pageant, opera, renaissance festival, railroad museums, transportation museum, soil, fiddle contest, band, sports hall of fame, pie, and maritime museum.

The gopher tortoise belongs to a group of land tortoises that originated in western North America nearly 60 million years ago. While at least 23 species of tortoise are known to have existed in North America since that time, only four remain today. Three of the living species are found in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. While they may be found throughout the coastal plain of the southeastern United States, most gopher tortoises are found in north-central Florida and southern Georgia. Gopher tortoise populations along Florida's southeast coast and the Florida Panhandle are greatly reduced from their historic numbers.

Gopher tortoises live in extensive subterranean burrows in dry upland habitats. A suitable habitat must have well-drained sandy soils, herbaceous food plants, and open sunny areas. Also, periodic natural fires play an important role in maintaining tortoise habitat. Tortoise burrows

also offer refuge to other animals including more than 360 animal species and some, such as the Florida mouse, cannot exist without the tortoise burrow. Gopher tortoises are thought to live longer than 60 years and have relatively slow growth rates which vary by geographic region.

In May and June, female tortoises lay their yearly clutch of eggs, 3-15 eggs, either in the sand mound in front of the burrow or another sunny area close by. In Florida, the incubation period is generally 80-90 days, but in Georgia it can last more than 100 days. Nest predation can be very high, and a female may only have one successful nest in ten years. These predators include raccoons, foxes, skunks, armadillos, and fire ants. While adults have few predators, young gopher tortoises are preyed upon by the raccoon, indigo snake, black bear, and red-tailed hawk. Florida, in the 1980's, outlawed the harvest of tortoises, banned the use of gasoline to collect rattlesnakes from gopher tortoise burrows, and banned tortoise races.

In September 2007, the gopher tortoise was reclassified as a threatened species in Florida. Previously, it had been classified as a species of special concern.

The Gopher Tortoise is currently the official reptile of Georgia.

The official reptile of Florida is the American Alligator.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1. Creates s. 15.0386, F.S., to designate the Gopher Tortoise as the official tortoise of Florida.

Section 2. Provides that this act shall take effect July 1, 2008.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. Other Constitutional Issues:

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

C. Government Sector Impact:

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.