

Environmental Management received numerous responses to our first draft of a gopher tortoise protection ordinance, some positive and some negative. Each response was reviewed and considered as staff examined proposed changes to the draft. As part of our distribution, we asked for comments from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

Parallel to our efforts, FWC was in the process of uplisting the gopher tortoise to threatened status and writing a draft management plan for their protection. FWC representatives, including Executive Director Ken Haddad were encouraged by Volusia County's efforts to be proactive, but were also concerned about whether our draft would duplicate some of the policies that were being developed through their process. To that end, Environmental Management has spent the last 8 months working closely with FWC through their gopher tortoise stakeholder group to provide input into the state management plan. Our main objective through this process was to ensure that the state produced a meaningful management plan and to ensure that our efforts would not be duplicative.

The FWC management plan relies heavily on local government cooperation and assistance, and our ordinance needs to be a mechanism to leverage our resources in a way that maximizes gopher tortoise protection. In other words, we want to focus our efforts on the areas that the FWC plan does not fully address, or that they are not equipped to manage. FWC's interim ban on entombment that took effect in July, coupled with the adoption of the management plan on September 12 has eliminated much of the urgency for a County ban on entombment. Now that the FWC has adopted the draft plan we feel we know what direction the county needs to pursue, and are in the final stages of preparing a new draft for public distribution.

We understand the public's concern about the time it has taken to move this process forward, but we felt it was critical to work with the state to develop a coordinated effort to preserve this species. Even without any delay to make necessary changes, it would have taken more than six months to adopt a countywide minimum standard to ban entombment. The FWC interim ban became effective within six months of our original draft.