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October 23, 2007 04:21 pm   

Gopher tortoises protected

Get more protection from FWC




A manufacturing plant in Genoa is being protected because part of the site is home to gopher tortoises. As a threatened species, gopher tortoises are protected. Their classification was upgraded from species of special concern to threatened, because the gopher tortoise population has declined 60-80% during the last 20 years.

Environmental consultant Dennis Price has applied for an incidental take permit with the Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC). The permit and an incidental take permit from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources of Hamilton County and Maronda Construction Systems.

The permit would allow the county to have the gopher tortoises relocated to a site approved by the FWC. The FWC does not receive a fee for this type of permit, but the recipient sites charge \$1,000 or more per gopher tortoise to relocate them.

An incidental take permit allows developers to fill in or cover gopher tortoise burrows and prevent the escape of tortoises or other animals that may be inside. The developers have to pay a mitigation

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fee that is used to purchase land in another area to be used as gopher tortoise habitat.

After the FWC commissioners met last week, gopher tortoises have some additional protection. The commissioners reviewed a new management plan at the meeting and developed an interim policy to provide more protection to gopher tortoises until the final consideration of the plan in September.

The interim policy goes into effect July 31. Developers will no longer be issued incidental take permits after that date. The policy will also apply to developers who have an incomplete incidental take permit application before that date.

On Tuesday, Price said he had not received any information from the FWC on the status of the County's applications for the permits.

According to Joy Hill, FWC spokesperson, it is their policy to allow people to carry out humane relocations of gopher tortoises from areas under a take permit. The actual criteria for a recipient site is not as stringent as those for a relocation permit, but the area must be approved by the FWC.

Hill said the developer would still have to pay the mitigation fee, so that more gopher tortoise habitat could be purchased. Any costs of the humane relocation would have to be paid by the developer.



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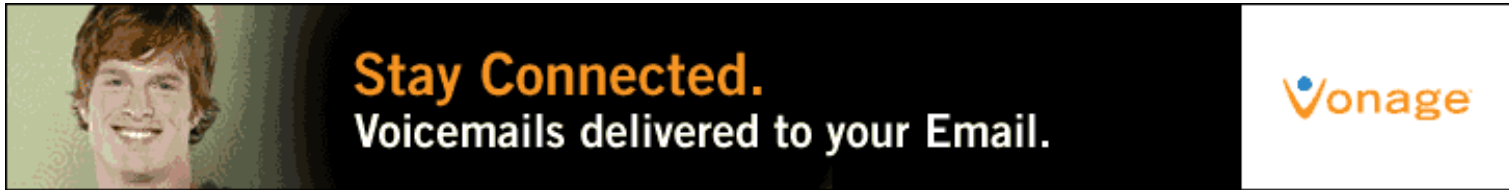


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