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PULLING FOR THE TORTOISE IS IN OUR BEST INTEREST

For thousands of years the gopher tortoise has made its home in the sandy soils of the coastal plains of Georgia and other Southern states. Somewhere along the line, its right to be here was recognized when it was named the official reptile of the state of Georgia.

At one time, the population of the tortoise was many times that of today. As longleaf pine trees have been removed, the habitat of the tortoise has been taken over by farms, towns, highways and, in general, the activities of man.

The tortoise been pushed aside so much that today it is a “threatened” species. And so now there is a multistate effort to protect it. But there is more to the story.

The fact is that if the tortoise population declines further so that it is listed as “endangered,” it could have costly implications on the forestry industry of the entire state.

The slow-moving reptile can mostly be found today ranging in the sandy soils where pine trees are grown. It makes burrows that provide it with protection and shelter, as well as a beneficial cover for hundreds of other animals.

What would be the cost to the forestry industry if sweeping protections had to be put into place to keep the animal species alive?

This is a case where protecting an animal and assisting in ensuring that it will be here for years to come is in the best interests of the tortoise, landowners, tree farmers and all those who depend on the vast forests across Georgia.

It is a race for survival. And if this particular tortoise fails to finish the race, we all lose.