

For Release: Immediate, Oct. 22, 2008

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Federal Agencies to Team with Landowners, Ranchers and Energy Industry
to Protect and Restore Wildlife Habitat on State, Federal and Private Lands

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Center of Excellence for Hazardous Materials Management have proposed to enter into an innovative, voluntary conservation program that encourages landowners, energy companies and ranchers to join the agencies in protecting and restoring habitat for the lesser prairie chicken and sand dune lizard in southeast New Mexico.

Included in the program are agreements for participants to voluntarily undertake or fund conservation measures for the species, which are candidates for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Service recommends using the agreements to encourage conservation, while providing greater certainty that if a species becomes listed as 'threatened' or 'endangered' despite their efforts, landowners will not be required to make significant additional changes in their activities on federal or non-federal lands.

Copies of the proposed agreements and an Environmental Assessment are available for public review and comment on the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/NewMexico/>. To receive a compact disc or paper copy of the agreements, contact New Mexico Ecological Services Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2105 Osuna NE., Albuquerque, NM 87113 or call 505-761-4707. Comments should be submitted to this address and are due by Nov. 20, 2008.

The lesser prairie chicken and the sand dune lizard uses habitat on intermingled federal and non-federal lands. Under the program a Candidate Conservation Agreement applies to federal agencies and ranchers or energy companies that lease lands from the federal government. A Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances applies to private landowners, state agencies, and entities leasing state lands.

"I encourage people to review these agreements and consider participating," said Benjamin N. Tuggle, Regional Director for the Service's Southwest Region. "Because of New Mexico's mix of federal, state and private lands, one conservation approach isn't enough. The voluntary agreements provide an avenue to integrate conservation efforts across these intermingled land ownerships."

Landowners who sign on to the Candidate Conservation Program could be asked to do some of the following: allow lesser prairie chickens to be placed on their lands; control mesquite which could impact habitat; make grazing modifications; modify fences to reduce collision by prairie chickens; avoid leasing habitat to energy development; keeping new surface disturbances out of dune areas; removing abandoned powerlines; and, agreeing not to modify occupied and suitable shinnery oak habitat.

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"This proactive, collaborative program represents a new era in conservation," said Linda Rundell, New Mexico State Director for the BLM in Santa Fe. "The measures we are taking for the two species will increase the likelihood of their recovery and serve as a model for other conservation partnerships."

The Bureau of Land Management will work with the Service and CEHMM to identify projects and mitigation measures for landowners and companies that participate in the agreements, Rundell added.

Earlier this year, the BLM completed a Resource Management Plan Amendment for public lands in southeastern New Mexico to protect the species. The conservation measures to be applied under the Candidate Conservation program announced today will add to these efforts, and multiply the benefits to the two species.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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About the Species:

Lesser prairie chickens are grouse that use habitats with sandy soils supporting shinnery oak-bluestem and sand sage-bluestem plant communities in the high plains. The birds were common in the early twentieth century, but their populations have declined due to wide-scale conversion of the native prairie.

The sand dune lizard prefers active and semi-stabilized sand dunes associated with shinnery oak and scattered sandsage. The oaks provide dune structure, shelter, and habitat for the species' prey base. Lizards are found in large dunes with deep, wind hollowed depressions called blowouts. They stay under vegetation or loose sand during the hot part of the day and at night.

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