



# News Release

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**For Immediate Release**

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## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Endorses Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-Wide Conservation Plan**

*Range-wide plan provides model for State leadership in conservation of a species proposed for listing under the ESA*

Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service endorsed the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' *Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-Wide Conservation Plan*, a landmark, collaborative planning effort to conserve a species proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The range-wide plan (RWP) represents a dedicated effort by the five range states of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado to conserve the lesser prairie-chicken. After an extensive review, the Service found the plan is consistent with criteria proposed last May for conserving the species, which is proposed for listing under the ESA. The plan calls for providing financial incentives to landowners who voluntarily manage their lands to benefit the species. It also includes a framework for mitigating the potentially harmful effects to lesser prairie-chicken habitat from development activity throughout its range.

“The unprecedented collaborative efforts of WAFWA and the five state wildlife agencies have produced a sound conservation plan for the lesser prairie-chicken,” said Service Director Dan Ashe. “We applaud the states’ commitment to lead conservation actions across the bird’s range.”

The Service’s endorsement is not a decision by the Service that implementing the plan will preclude the need to protect the lesser prairie-chicken under the ESA. The Service will carefully consider the plan, its implementation and effectiveness when it makes a final determination on whether to list the lesser prairie-chicken under the ESA in March, 2014.

Under the plan, agreements with participating landowners will aim to improve habitat conditions for the lesser prairie-chicken, increase populations and provide for long-term conservation of the species. The plan also establishes a framework for mitigating impacts from a wide range of activities with a goal of providing a net conservation benefit to the species.

“We are encouraged to see U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service endorsement of the five-state, range-wide plan to conserve this iconic grassland bird and its native prairie habitat,” said Carter Smith, WAFWA president and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department executive director, speaking on behalf of WAFWA and the five state agencies. “Years of due diligence have gone into this plan, guided by

scientific research and monitoring, and developed with input from landowners, agriculture, wind and oil and gas interests and other stakeholders. We can now work at the local level to implement the plan, facilitate more conservation for the bird while allowing sustainable land use and responsible economic development, and hopefully preclude the need to list this species.”

In the coming weeks, the Service will revise the May 6, 2013, proposed 4(d) special rule for the lesser prairie-chicken to more specifically identify the range-wide conservation plan as one that, when implemented, will address the conservation needs of the species. If the Service ultimately determines that the lesser prairie-chicken should be listed as a threatened species, the revised 4(d) rule would provide a mechanism for ESA compliance. Linking the plan to a 4(d) special rule would offer participating landowners and industry participants regulatory certainty, as actions carried out in accordance with the plan would be in compliance with the ESA, even if the species requires ESA protection.

The lesser prairie-chicken is a species of prairie grouse commonly recognized for its colorful spring mating display and orange eye combs. Once abundant across much of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado (the five range states), the lesser prairie-chicken’s historical range of native grasslands and prairies has been reduced by an estimated 84 percent. The substantial decrease in the range of the species is primarily a result of habitat fragmentation and loss caused by development and conversion of the species’ native grassland habitat to other uses. Last year, the population declined by an estimated 50 percent, primarily due to drought conditions in the West.

America's fish, wildlife and plant resources belong to all of us, and ensuring the health of imperiled species is a shared responsibility. The Service is actively engaged with conservation partners and the public in the search for improved and innovative ways to conserve and recover imperiled species such as the Working Lands for Wildlife program. To learn more about the Endangered Species program, go to <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies was founded in 1922. It currently consists of 23 member states and provinces that have primary responsibility and authority for protecting and managing fish and wildlife in the western United States and Canada. WAFWA promotes the principles of sound resource management, as well as strengthening partnerships and cooperation among local, state, and federal agencies, non-government conservation organizations, and private industry. To learn more about WAFWA and other conservation efforts, and to find a copy of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-Wide Conservation Plan, please go to [www.wafwa.org](http://www.wafwa.org).

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