

## **Lesser Prairie-Chicken Conservation Coordination between NRCS and USFWS**

### **What is the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative and what does it do?**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has established the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI) to restore and conserve declining populations of lesser prairie-chickens and their habitat using two popular USDA conservation programs — the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program \(EQIP\)](#) and [Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program \(WHIP\)](#). The LPCI will give participating landowners the opportunity to implement practices that contribute to the sustainability of their agricultural operation and help conserve the lesser prairie-chicken, which is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

### **Who can participate?**

Through NRCS' LPCI, significant financial and technical assistance is available to private landowners to implement voluntary, proactive conservation actions on their agricultural operations. The goal of the LPCI is to increase lesser prairie-chicken populations by improving habitat while sustaining working farms and ranches. The Initiative is focused strategically on areas with significant populations of lesser prairie-chickens and their habitat in five western states – Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.

### **Conferencing – What does it mean?**

The two agencies have used the “conferencing” provisions under section 7 of the ESA to assess the potential benefits and adverse effects of specific NRCS conservation practices to be implemented and maintained by landowners under the LPCI. The conference report analyzed the expected cumulative effects of LPCI implementation on the species through careful review of specific NRCS conservation practices and how they will be implemented to remove or reduce the known threats to the lesser prairie-chicken.

During development of the conference report, the FWS worked closely with NRCS to determine the effects of 22 individual conservation practices, both those that will benefit the bird and those that could potentially adversely affect the bird and its habitat. Conservation measures were developed to avoid, ameliorate, or minimize the identified adverse effects that could result from implementation of the practices prescribed in landowners' conservation plans.

This conference report provides certainty to cooperators who voluntarily implement the NRCS-sponsored conservation practices and conservation measures that those actions will be in compliance with the ESA while the lesser prairie-chicken is a candidate species. A Conference Opinion will be prepared, based on any additional information, which will further refine the conservation practices and conservation measures. This opinion will provide coverage for incidental take for landowners who implement these practices and measures should the lesser prairie-chicken be listed as a threatened or endangered species.

## **How does the conference report affect landowners?**

The conference report provides land owners predictability about the impact of their conservation efforts and confidence to plan their management actions. The conclusion of the conference report lets landowners know that their implementation of the LPCI of conservation practices and associated conservation measures through their NRCS conservation plan are designed to benefit the lesser prairie-chicken and have a neutral or positive impact to other listed and candidate species that may occupy habitat on their property.

The vast majority (approximately 95 %) of lesser prairie-chicken habitat occurs on privately owned and operated lands across the five-state range. Therefore, the voluntary actions of private landowners are the key to maintaining, enhancing, restoring and reconnecting habitat for the species.

It is important to note that the LPCI does not address or discuss the following potential sources of adverse effects to the lesser prairie-chicken: commercial-scale energy development or associated infrastructure; conversions of rangeland and other suitable lesser prairie-chicken habitat types to crop production or development; construction of new public roads or highways; and actions and programs managed by the Farm Service Agency as the agency with responsibility for administration of the Conservation Reserve Program.

## **How will the lesser prairie-chicken benefit?**

Lesser prairie-chickens depend upon a landscape dominated by native grasslands and prairies. In the past few decades, these vast, open habitats have been altered to such a degree that lesser prairie-chicken populations have decreased dramatically and are continuing to decline as many of the threats of the past continue, and new threats, such as wind energy, emerge.

As farmers and ranchers collectively implement conservation practices that specifically reduce threats to the species by improving habitat quality and extent, removing structures and fences that can cause mortality, and controlling invasive species such as eastern red cedar, and replacing invasive grasses and forbs with native species, we anticipate that the lesser prairie-chicken will respond positively to site specific changes. As more landowners in important lesser prairie-chicken habitat areas enroll in the LPCI, fragmentation of the expansive grassland prairie landscape essential to their survival will be reduced.

## **Why are lesser prairie-chicken populations declining?**

Today, the lesser prairie-chicken is distributed across five western States; it is a landscape-scale species, requiring large expanses of contiguous acreage with healthy native ground cover of grasses, forbs and shrubs to meet all seasonal habitat requirements.

Once hunted as a commercial game bird for upscale restaurants and railroad workers, the lesser prairie-chicken has been a candidate species under the ESA since 1995. Biologists estimate that the occupied range of lesser prairie-chicken has declined by 92 percent since the 1800s. The most serious threat to the lesser prairie-chicken is loss of habitat from conversion of native rangelands to introduced forages and cultivated crops, conversion of suitable restored habitat in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to cropland, cumulative habitat degradation caused by incompatible grazing practices, and energy development, including transmission, wind, oil, and gas development. Additional threats are woody

plant invasion of open prairies due to fire suppression, incompatible herbicide use, and habitat fragmentation caused by structural and transportation developments. Many of these threats may exacerbate the normal effects of periodic drought on lesser prairie-chicken populations. Fragmentation of mixed grass prairie, sand sagebrush prairie and shinney oak grassland habitats through numerous mechanisms including those above is recognized as the primary cause of the decline of lesser prairie-chicken.

**Are there other programs for the lesser prairie-chicken conservation available to private landowners?**

The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program provides financial and technical assistance to private landowners willing to restore and enhance habitat for Federal Trust Species, including migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, inter-jurisdictional fish and other declining species, such as lesser prairie-chicken. This non-regulatory, incentive-based program uses local field biologists working one-on-one with private landowners and other partners to plan, implement and monitor habitat improvement projects. Program staff work closely with NRCS staff to leverage resources and technical assistance capacity to deliver habitat improvement projects in high priority habitat. Information on the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, including focus areas for Program resources within the range of the lesser prairie-chicken species can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/partners/>.

Another tool for conservation of candidate and at-risk species is the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA). CCAs are voluntary conservation agreements administered by the FWS that are available to non-Federal landowners who are willing to engage in practices that address threats to a species. CCAs can be effective in reducing the need for listing a species if conservation actions addressing specific threats are taken on multiple properties within the range of a species. CCAs may address a broader range of issues and threats to the species than those in the LPCI, for example, urban and exurban expansion and oil and gas development; however the information on threats and conservation actions contained in the conference report can be used in developing a CCAA.