



## U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

### Lesser Prairie-Chicken Conservation

*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*



Doug Holt

The lesser prairie-chicken is a species of prairie grouse that occupies a five-state range including portions of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado. The species is state listed as threatened in Colorado, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) identified the species as a candidate for Federal listing in 1998.

The lesser prairie-chicken is commonly recognized for its feathered feet and stout build. Plumage of the lesser prairie-chicken is characterized by a cryptic pattern of alternating brown and buff-colored barring. Males display brilliant yellow-orange eyecoms and reddish-purple air sacs during courtship displays.

Lesser prairie-chicken populations need large tracts of relatively intact native grasslands and prairies to thrive. Threats to the lesser prairie-chicken include habitat loss, modification, degradation, and fragmentation within its range.

The vast majority of lesser prairie-chicken habitat occurs on privately owned and operated lands across the five-state range. Therefore, voluntary participation by landowners is key to maintaining, enhancing, restoring and reconnecting habitat for the species. It is often said that “what is good for prairie chickens is good for the ranch.”

There are many conservation measures available for landowners to consider voluntarily implementing on their lands to assist in candidate species conservation. Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCAs) and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) are FWS programs which provide conservation for candidate species and their habitats. CCAAs provide landowners and industry the opportunity to implement conservation practices. The agreements benefit the species, and if a species becomes listed, the landowner can continue to manage their lands as outlined in their CCAA without additional requirements.

That is the “assurance” FWS provides in the agreement. In New Mexico, a CCA and CCAAs are now being implemented with five oil companies and twenty ranches. In Texas, we currently have CCAAs with eight ranches. We are in the process of developing an agreement in Oklahoma and we hope similar agreements can be developed in Kansas and Colorado. Continuing to enroll landowners and industry in the CCAAs and CCAs is extremely important.

### **Voluntary Conservation Measures for the Lesser Prairie-Chicken on Private Lands**

Below are some of the actions a landowner might consider undertaking to maintain and enhance lesser prairie-chicken habitat. Several state and federal agencies offer cost-share and technical assistance in conservation planning and implementing voluntary practices on private lands.

- Incorporate lesser prairie-chicken habitat needs into ranch and farm planning. Manage livestock grazing and agricultural activities to provide for necessary habitats.
- Consider rerouting roads, powerlines and other infrastructure if a conservation benefit for lesser prairie-chicken can be accomplished by doing so.
- Identify areas that may be restored to native vegetation and work toward reestablishment and enhancement of native plant communities.
- Allow removal of legacy oil and gas wells and infrastructure, and restoration of lesser prairie-chicken habitat.
- Maintain enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program.
- Consider implementing prescribed fire where appropriate.
- Maintain and reestablish connectivity of habitats.
- Maintain patches of native mixed-grass, short-grass, and shrubland vegetation that

provide connectivity between large areas of lesser prairie-chicken habitat.

- Plan the placement of oil and gas, wind energy, transmission, and other infrastructure that is within the landowner’s discretion in a way to reduce negative impacts (such as fragmentation) on lesser prairie-chickens and their habitat.
- Apply herbicides and insecticides in a way to improve habitat mosaic and food resources. Technical assistance is available from many sources to assist with planning these treatments.
- Implement appropriate fence design and marking guidelines in occupied lesser prairie-chicken habitat.
- Consider installing escape ramps in open water sources and trenches within occupied lesser prairie-chicken habitat.
- Consider allowing state wildlife agency employees or representatives, with prior notification, to survey private lands for the presence of lesser-prairie chickens and for habitat suitability for this species.



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