



# News Release

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**Southwest Region (Arizona • New Mexico • Oklahoma • Texas) [www.fws.gov/southwest/](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/)**

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## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Reopens Comment Period on Lesser Prairie-Chicken Listing Proposal**

*Agency seeks additional information from public, scientific community  
to inform final decision and continues conservation efforts with partners*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced the reopening of the public comment period on its 2012 proposal to add the lesser prairie-chicken to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. The public comment period will be reopened for 45 days to allow an opportunity for the public, the scientific community and other interested parties to provide input on the original listing proposal in light of a newly-released range-wide conservation plan for the species. The conservation plan was drafted by the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Working Group, in association with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. A copy of the plan is available at [http://www.wafwa.org/documents/AprilDraftLEPCPlanSubmittedUSFWS04\\_02\\_2013.pdf](http://www.wafwa.org/documents/AprilDraftLEPCPlanSubmittedUSFWS04_02_2013.pdf).

“Our overarching goal is to work with our state and federal partners, private landowners and others to support and expand efforts to conserve the lesser prairie-chicken and its habitat before it requires the protection of the ESA,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe. “Reopening the public comment period gives us the opportunity to gather additional information on the listing proposal and the range-wide conservation plan, underscoring the important conservation contributions of working lands.”

“We are encouraged by the efforts of the five range states and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to develop a conservation plan that covers a broad spectrum of partners and activities,” said Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, Regional Director for the Service's Southwest Region. “The Service remains committed to working with industry, private landowners, the states and others to identify and implement actions that conserve the lesser prairie-chicken as part of a working landscape.”

The reopened comment period also allows the public to review and comment on a proposed special rule that, if approved, would foster conservation of the lesser prairie-chicken and give landowners across the species’ range additional flexibility to manage their land, should the species require protection as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The proposed special rule, issued under Section 4(d) of the ESA, would allow take of lesser prairie-chicken incidental to activities carried out through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative and activities included in comprehensive prairie-chicken conservation programs developed by or in

coordination with the state fish and wildlife agencies. The 4(d) rule would only be implemented if the lesser prairie-chicken were to be listed.

The Endangered Species Act prohibits “take” of protected animal species, which includes killing, harming, or harassing the species or destroying its habitat. Section 4(d) of the Act, however, allows the Service to establish a special rule defining the conditions under which take of a threatened species may be exempted from these prohibitions. The Service generally issues such rules to facilitate the overall conservation of the species or to preserve traditional land use activities, where such activities will not significantly affect ongoing and future conservation and recovery efforts.

The lesser prairie-chicken is a species of prairie grouse commonly recognized for its colorful spring mating display and orange eye combs. Once found in abundant numbers across much of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas (the five range states), the lesser prairie-chickens' 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 agriculture.

The lesser prairie-chicken requires large areas of intact native grassland and shrubland to maintain self-sustaining populations. Habitat loss has resulted in reduced populations of lesser prairie-chickens, making them especially vulnerable to ongoing impacts on the landscape. The decline of the lesser prairie-chicken sends a signal that native grasslands are in trouble. By taking actions to conserve the species, we can also restore the health of our native grasslands that support local economies and communities in addition to migratory birds and other wildlife.

The Service continues to work with the five range states to encourage voluntary conservation of the species and its habitat. Conservation agreements are currently in place in Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma. Additional partnerships between federal agencies and private landowners are contributing to restoring, reconnecting and conserving habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken. Most significantly, the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative has provided funding and technical assistance to private landowners seeking to improve habitat for the prairie-chicken. More information on these agreements and the benefits they provide for landowners can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/LPC.html>.

The reopening of the public comment period on the listing proposal, the draft rangewide conservation plan and notice of the proposal for a 4(d) special rule was published in the *Federal Register* on May 6, 2013. Comments will be accepted until June 20, 2013. More information is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/LPC.html>.

For additional information, contact Dixie Porter, Field Supervisor, Oklahoma Ecological Services Field Office, 9014 E. 21st Street, Tulsa, OK, 74129; telephone 918-581-7458. Persons who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 800-877-8339.

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. To learn more about the Endangered Species program, go to <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

*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](http://www.fws.gov). Connect with our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/usfws](http://www.facebook.com/usfws), follow our tweets at [www.twitter.com/usfwshq](http://www.twitter.com/usfwshq), watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>.*

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