

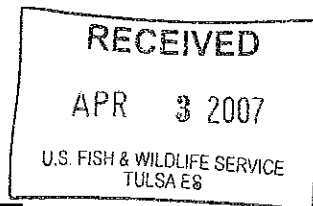
STATE OF COLORADO

Bill Ritter, Jr., Governor
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

DIVISION OF WILDLIFE

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

Bruce McCloskey, Director
6060 Broadway
Denver, Colorado 80216
Telephone: (303) 297-1192



*For Wildlife-
For People*

Stephanie A. Manes
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Tulsa Ecological Services
9014 E. 21st Street
Tulsa, OK 74129

March 29, 2007

RE: Lesser Prairie-Chicken Candidate Notice of Review

Dear Ms. Manes-

We received the request for information relating to the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Candidate Notice of Review and submit the following information for your consideration. This information summarizes our involvement with Lesser Prairie-Chicken (LPC) conservation over the past several years.

Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) Biologists conduct spring time lek counts and have done so for the past 30 years in some counties. The 2007 spring lek counts have not yet been conducted. Our results in 2006 suggest that the population in Baca County apparently continues to decline while the Prowers County population is increasing. Three new lek sites were discovered in Prowers County in 2006 as well as seven in 2005 and four new sites were found in 2004. Limited data suggest stable to increasing populations in Kiowa and Cheyenne counties. Habitat conditions across most of southeast Colorado have improved dramatically over the past three spring seasons with increased precipitation and abundant cover at most locations. 2006 was an extremely dry period over most of the LPC range and habitat was far from ideal.

Southern Colorado experienced record setting blizzards and periods of extremely cold temperatures during December 2006-February 2007. The impacts of this weather event on the LPC remain unknown. Hopefully the birds in southern Kiowa, Prowers and Baca were able to move to better conditions (i.e. Kansas) or extreme southern Baca County during the blizzards. If the birds did not move, winter mortality is expected to be much greater than normal. We believe good over-winter survival was nearly impossible if the birds did not move significant distances. There was virtually no cover and little food in the occupied LPC range in southern Kiowa, Prowers, and the majority of Baca for 60+ days. For the most part, the sandsage was completely buried. Hopefully, this higher winter storm mortality this will only be temporary for the population. If there are source populations of birds nearby, the affected population should bounce back reasonably soon. The birds in northern Kiowa and Cheyenne counties likely did not suffer excessive winter related mortality, as conditions were not as severe. For this spring, it is reasonable to expect a much reduced breeding population unless the birds moved 20-30 miles into Kansas and then returned for this years breeding season.

CDOW usually supports two temporary employees (CDOW, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) cost share last year) for one month of LPC lek counts. Vehicles have been provided, as well. CDOW permanent FTE involvement varies by year. Our terrestrial biologist usually spends 2-4 weeks of lek counts and searches, local district wildlife managers spend anywhere from 1 day to 3-4 weeks for lek counts and searches. Volunteer time is also utilized. Typically, we have 1 to 5 additional volunteers annually for 2-4 days of lek counts/searches. In 2006, 47 volunteer hours were tallied for the spring lek counts. This equates to about \$722 in labor. An intensive search effort with ~10-15 CDOW employees and 10-15 volunteers for a 3-day period occurs every third year. 2007 will be one of these intensive-search years.

(continued)

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, Harris D. Sherman, Executive Director
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The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) demonstrated increased emphasis in conducting LPC survey routes and inventory via the use of USFS employees over the past several years. On the Comanche National Grassland (NG) in 2006, efforts primarily focused on surveying the LPC population and habitat. USFS staff continued to implement a rest-rotation grazing system in two allotments containing LPC habitat. Monitoring suggests this approach has improved nesting habitat in these locations. The primary factor influencing LPC in 2006 on the Comanche NG was severe drought, which affected spring and early summer nesting/brood rearing habitat. A hail storm during the summer also affected that area, followed by one of the most severe winter blizzards on record. All of these factors are likely to compound the long-term decline in the population that surveys (1980s - 2006) have documented. However, this year's abundant winter moisture may at least support nesting habitat recovery this spring. USFS continued to offer LPC viewing opportunities to the public at their blind in 2006.

The CDOW Watchable Wildlife program also sponsors viewing opportunities. The general public is provided approximately 6 weeks of viewing opportunity from blinds at leks with 3 visitor days per week for a total of 200 viewers. Additionally, a private landowner offers tours for approximately an additional 70 or so folks. Tevebaugh Ranch offers guided LPC tours in Baca County, as well.

A conservation easement was secured on a privately held piece of property to protect LPC habitat. This is a perpetual easement totaling 1280 acres closed on 29 November 2005 and was focused primarily on Lesser Prairie Chicken habitat. The property is located on the border of Colorado and Kansas (in the Lamar area) and does have a population of birds occupying the landscape. The habitat is primarily mid-grass dominated with some interspersed forbs and some woody vegetation and is surrounded by center pivot irrigated agricultural land (corn). There is one small (approximately 40 acre) prairie dog colony on site. The rest of the property is dominated by sandy/sandy loam soils.

CDOW has been actively engaged in the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group. This range-wide group is currently in the process of assembling the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Conservation Initiative, a strategic planning document to guide conservation of the species throughout its range. Also, CDOW has been working with the North American Grouse Partnership to draft the Prairie Grouse Management Plan. This plan addresses conservation needs of not only the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, but also the Greater Prairie-Chicken and the Plains Sharp-tailed Grouse throughout their respective ranges.

There are several new threats that we foresee that could potentially affect LPC populations in Colorado. There is the potential for an increase in corn production through Farm Bill incentives to move towards bio-fuel production. This could serve to remove high quality CRP stands throughout the species' range. Expiration of CRP enrollments will have a large impact in eastern CO in eastern Prowers and to a lesser degree in Baca County. Each of these counties have exceeded the CRP cap waiver, which means we will be losing the additional acreage as well as those allotments due to expire. However, expiration of CRP contracts may also present the opportunity to reseed decadent CRP fields in the future. Many CRP fields, particularly in Baca County, are comprised of a monoculture of side-oats gramma, which is of very little value to LPC.

Continued energy development (i.e. wind, oil and gas) may have negative effects to the species. Depending on many factors such as site locations, timing and other mitigating factors, direct mortality as well as habitat fragmentation and increased disturbance could have substantial effects on the species. Power lines may have an additional impact since they provide opportunities for both direct mortality as well as perching locations for several predators. Some commercial wind development is occurring to enhance the existing network but that effort is centered mostly west of 287 north of the Bent /Baca/Prowers corner, which is not known to be occupied range for LPC. There have been some preliminary discussions of developing wind energy resources northeast of Kit Carson. This development may take several years to materialize, and LPC activity hasn't been documented in that area. Oil and gas development and exploration might be on a distant horizon for Baca County.

Local CDOW biologists and District Wildlife Managers meet approximately 2-3 times per year with partner agencies including the USFWS Partners for Wildlife (PFW) biologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) range conservationists/biologists, and USFS biologists on the Comanche NG to discuss conservation activities and survey efforts for the coming year. The local LPC working group is trying to find ways to better utilize Farm Bill programs to benefit LPC. PFW has been working with CDOW, NRCS, the local Baca Conservation District and RMBO to interseed existing CRP land with forbs. In the past few years there have been ~500 acres interseeded.

Additional outreach efforts to connect with private landowners throughout the plains of Colorado occur on a regular basis. In 2006, 7 workshops were held, reaching over 1400 private landowners. While this effort is not directed primarily at Lesser Prairie-Chicken Conservation, conservation needs of this species are discussed. The DVD produced by the LPCIWG a few years ago is distributed when these meetings are held in appropriate locations.

LPC is not a hunted species in Colorado, so there is no legal harvest of the species.

While Colorado is on the periphery of LPC range, conservation activities are formulated to enhance LPC population maintenance and growth.

Thank you for your attention to our information regarding conservation of LPC in southeast Colorado.

Sincerely,



Thomas P. Nesler
Statewide Manager
Wildlife Conservation Section
Colorado Division of Wildlife

Cc: CDOW:
Bruce McCloskey
Jeff Ver Steeg
Tom Remington
Rick Kahn
Seth McClean
Bob Davies

CDNR:
Tom Blickensderfer

USFWS:
Susan Linner

NRCS:
Jeff Burwell