

U.S. Fish and Wildlife to consider status for lesser prairie-chicken

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Based on scientific evidence that the lesser prairie-chicken and its habitat are in decline, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced recently it is initiating a process to consider whether the species should be recognized as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

State conservation agencies, in partnership with federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Land Management and partners such as the Sutton Center, are working on a range-wide, voluntary conservation planning effort that will play a significant role in conserving lesser prairie-chicken habitat.

“We are encouraged by current multi-state efforts to conserve the lesser prairie-chicken and its habitat, but more work needs to be done to reverse its decline,” said Dan Ashe, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“Similar to what state and federal partners in this region accomplished when the dunes sagebrush lizard was proposed, we must re-double our important work to identify solutions that provide for the long-term conservation of the species and also help working families remain on the land they have stewarded for generations.”

The service will make a final determination on whether to add the lesser prairie-chicken to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife based on the best available science. Members of the public and scientific community are encouraged to review and comment on the proposal during the 90-day public comment period.

“Regardless of whether the lesser prairie-chicken ultimately requires protection under the ESA, its decline is a signal that our native grasslands are in trouble,” said Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, regional director for the service’s Southwest Region. “We know that these grasslands support not only dozens of native migratory bird and wildlife species, but also farmers, ranchers and local communities across the region.”

Once found in abundant numbers across much of the five states of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, the lesser prairie-chicken’s historical range of native grasslands and prairies has been reduced by an estimated 84 percent. The State of Colorado has listed the

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species as threatened. The service first identified the lesser prairie-chicken as a candidate for ESA protection in 1998.

The service is working with the five states to encourage voluntary conservation of the species and its habitat. Conservation agreements are currently in place in Texas and New Mexico, with another under development in 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 and Working Lands for Wildlife initiatives have provided funding and technical assistance to private landowners seeking to improve habitat for the prairie-chicken.

The service continues to work with partners and private landowners to develop voluntary conservation agreements that will protect the lesser prairie-chicken and the native grasslands on which it depends, while assuring that ranching, agriculture and other economic activities can continue regardless of whether the species is listed.

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 proposal is part of the service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan that resolves a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA listing duties. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce litigation and allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of the ESA's protections.

The lesser prairie-chicken is a species of prairie grouse 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 eyecombs and reddish-purple air sacs during courtship displays.

The service is requesting comments or information from the public, governmental agencies, the

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scientific community, industry or any other interested parties concerning this proposed rule.

Comments must be received within 90 days of its publication in the Federal Register. More information is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/LPC.html> .

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