

Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries **LPCI**



Overview

The lesser prairie-chicken is a prairie grouse native to the Southern Great Plains. While the lesser prairie-chicken historically inhabited an estimated 180,000 square mile area of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, the current range of the bird is now roughly 16 percent of its historic range. In May 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the lesser prairie-chicken as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. With 95 percent of the chicken's current range on private lands, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is uniquely positioned to make a huge contribution to the conservation of this species. Voluntary conservation efforts with proper grazing management that includes drought planning coupled with brush management, prescribed burning and other supporting practices will maintain and improve lesser prairie-chicken habitat.

Priorities

The Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI) aims to maintain and enhance more sustainable habitat increasing the lesser prairie-chicken population on working grazing lands. NRCS is partnering with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) to provide a unified and targeted approach to prairie chicken management and conservation. This joint approach improves the opportunity for

successful conservation of prairie chickens by engaging all partners. With NRCS focusing their efforts on grazing management, invasive brush control and assistance to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), NRCS can have the greatest impact on private lands conservation

Funding

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Results

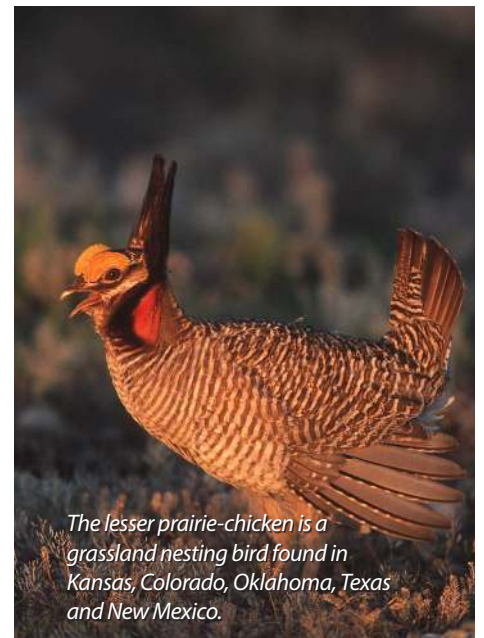
In fiscal year 2014, LPCI contracted with 23 producers through EQIP. These 23 producers will improve prairie chicken habitat and rangeland sustainability on almost 121,000 acres of Southern Great Plains prairie.

Since 2010, NRCS and our partners have used EQIP and former Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) to assist producers in implementing core and supporting conservation practices providing prairie chicken benefits. NRCS has entered into over 400 contracts to benefit almost 950,000 acres of targeted prairie chicken conservation. This amounts to an investment of over \$20 million of conservation within the species current range.

The real success of LPCI lies within the building and strengthening of partnerships that provide a unified approach for prairie chicken

conservation. NRCS coordinated efforts with WAFWA resulted in common protocols to assess and monitor vegetation baseline conditions and its change over time on all planned acres. This combined data will help determine how the agency's efforts are affecting prairie chicken habitat, and inform the recovery goals.

Our network of on the ground assistance is expanding to assist producers with their technical needs related to prairie chicken conservation and rangeland sustainability



The lesser prairie-chicken is a grassland nesting bird found in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico.

Feature Story

Sustainable Ranching and the Lesser Prairie Chicken: Two Equivalent Ideals

Already a conservation minded rancher, Bill Barby decided to take his conservation work to the next level by restoring habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken on his 3,700 acre ranch in southwest Kansas. Through LPCI, Barby made a number of improvements to his land that enhances his operation and habitat simultaneously. The rotational grazing system, water storage improvements and drought planning measures created better habitat while also providing better forage for his cattle.

“I realized I needed to slow down moving my cattle,” Barby said. Working with NRCS, he divided his land into nine pastures to manage his grazing and to help rejuvenate grasses to return habitat to historic conditions. By using a rotational grazing system, his pastures boast a variety of grasses, providing valuable habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

As part of this system, Barby grazes cattle early in the season, and then allows pastures to rest during winter. The cold weather causes the grass to go dormant, leaving behind the perfect habitat for prairie-chickens to nest and raise their young. Then, once the chickens are done nesting, he can rotate the cattle back on those pastures to eat forage again. Barby is also working with NRCS to use prescribed fire to restore and maintain prairies and grasslands. Fire is a natural part of the native prairies and maintains grassland from invasive woody species while invigorating grass and forb growth. Managed

grazing systems, like Barby’s, have more grasses and provide more fuel for effectively using prescribed fire, After prescribed fire, young grass and forbs thrive, creating excellent brood-rearing habitat.

With support from LPCI, he also developed a drought management plan – the first step in providing a producer a pathway to sustain long-term healthy grassland and water sources. Past drought conditions forced Barby to destock, or take cattle off, his land to let it rest and wait for rain. Proper grazing management prior to future droughts will reduce the impact to herd numbers and allow a quicker recovery of the vegetation

critical to both grazing animals and the lesser prairie chicken.

Managing for improved lesser prairie chicken habitat equals sound management in sustainable ranching. These advantages are sometimes difficult to see. A variety of desirable grasses, a high degree of growing season rest, and strategic fire are management practices that promote diverse healthy prairies.

“What works to get good chicken habitat makes for good grazing country for cattle,” Barby said. goals to reduce phosphorous and is making headway on its annual goals to reduce nitrogen.



Fiscal Year 2014 Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

Region	Contracts	Acres	Obligations
Central	4.00	9,776.30	\$174,138.00
Central	3.00	12,439.70	\$573,828.00
Central	11.00	47,585.80	\$897,458.56
West	2.00	11,359.40	\$220,644.00
West	3.00	39,647.42	\$855,872.00
Totals	629	98,022	\$26,433,753

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, January 2015.