

Lesser Prairie Chicken: Five-State Conservation Plan

Project Background

The lesser prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus pallicinctus*), hereafter LEPC, is a species of grouse found in shrublands and grasslands of the Southern Great Plains. Historically, the LEPC was common in areas of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

While historical records are too limited to precisely define the LEPC's original range, about 90% is no longer suitable for the species due to extensive conversion of prairies to croplands and prairie habitat degradation and fragmentation.

In response to a 1995 petition to list the LEPC as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined it was "warranted, but precluded from listing." This finding indicates that evidence supported listing the species under the ESA, but also that the agency had higher-priority species to address at that time.

Unless LEPC populations sufficiently increase, the species may be ESA-listed in the future – resulting in additional federal regulations and restrictions on human uses and development within its range.

The possibility of an ESA listing has increased concerns for the species' status, as well as for the possible constraints a listing could cause on various activities. Since the USFWS's determination, the LEPC has received added scientific and management attention as well as funding for conservation-oriented research, management, educational outreach, and cooperative efforts with landowners.

A Lesser Prairie-Chicken Interstate Working Group, including participation by the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism, has been working together to prioritize research needs and coordinate management efforts among the five states in which LEPCs are still found at http://www.wafwa.org/html/prairie_chicken.shtml.

Federal and state funds have been made available for habitat conservation and restoration on private lands through cooperative partnerships with landowners.

The Interstate Working Group has contracted with The Ecosystem Management Research Institute (EMRI) to develop the range-wide conservation plan (www.emri.org). The final plan will address:

- The science describing the habitat and other needs of LEPC's and its management, and identification of research/data gaps.

- The characteristics of high quality LEPC habitat, the types of management that would contribute to the maintenance or restoration of this quality habitat, and how much habitat is needed – and its distribution – to maintain viable LEPC populations.
- How LEPC conservation can be conducted while minimizing effects on human economies and developments.
- Appropriate habitat improvement/conservation goals and long-term management actions/strategies to achieve these goals.
- Coordinated strategies to implement management actions – including interagency coordination and incentive or other programs that will make restoration and maintenance of LEPC habitat economically viable for landowners.

EMRI is also coordinating development of the sections of the range-wide plan applicable to Kansas, in consultation with all involved parties.