



Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative

Summary of Field Trainings (Kansas - March 13 & 14, Texas - March 20 & 21, New Mexico - March 22 & 23)

We would like to thank everyone who attended the training. From our vantage point it was a tremendous success with more than 170 participants. There was great input on changes to the evaluation and monitoring tools and some excellent overall discussion. We understand that time spent out of the field office during program (EQIP, WHIP) sign ups is always a concern. It is your participation and constructive input that helps us do a better job of getting you the tools and answers you need to make this Initiative a success. While some of the following may be a repeat of what you already heard at the training, we want to ensure that everyone is on the same page as we move forward. As always if you have any questions, concerns or just thoughts you would like to share please don't hesitate to contact either of us directly.

General:

Purpose of the Initiative: While the Initiative has been around a few years there may not have been adequate discussion about the overall goals and objectives of the Initiative. First and foremost the purpose of the Initiative is to provide for the establishment, improvement, and maintenance of Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat. While the potential listing of the LEPC is not a battle for NRCS to concern itself with habitat conservation is a responsibility of NRCS. With over 95% of the LEPC habitat found on private lands NRCS is in a unique position to provide the assistance to landowners to sustain populations and to sustain their ranching operations in a profitable manner. This shared vision is the key to the success of LPCI — sustainable agriculture can yield sustainable wildlife populations. The Initiative gives us the tools through both FA and TA to make this effort successful.

The Initiative is also a new way of doing business for NRCS. There are 3 ways the initiative is a new paradigm:

- 1) We are working with non-traditional partners for a shared vision of voluntary conservation that
- 2) focuses our work on habitat for a Candidate species to alleviate the need to regulate its management under the Endangered Species Act,
- 3) and to achieve this, sound monitoring and evaluation tools are needed to measure how NRCS conservation has reduced the threats to LEPC.

Although the Listing is a pervasive issue, we need to first focus on sustainable rangeland management and then how that translates to LEPC sustainability, and ultimately that leads to *no need* to list.



We need to redouble our efforts in selling conservation - the same way we always have. That sell comes through improvement of the producers operation that will improve their resources and ultimately their profits. Healthy grasslands are not only what the LEPC needs but what private range operations need. The ultimate fate of the LEPC is tied directly to maintaining profitable private grazing lands. *This is an opportunity for us to do what we do best-* sound conservation planning and implementing those conservation actions!

To accomplish this task we have and will continue to partner with other state and federal agencies and NGOs throughout the five state region. Landscape conservation is not accomplished in a vacuum; and while all partners may not always agree, if we can focus on the 80% we agree on and set aside the 20% we don't then we are going to maintain and strengthen our partnerships, that are so critical to the success of this effort.

Coordination of ranking and need for uniform tools: In order for the NRCS to quantify the effectiveness and outcomes of the Initiative it is important a consistent approach be utilized across the five states. Consistent application of the program and practices will be needed to show we are obtaining the benefits we desire. Use of the Threats Checklist will enable a compilation of the primary threats being dealt with. The revised WHEGS and Threats checklist are attached to this email and will be posted to the LPCI sharepoint site.

Accomplishment of benefits: We must be sure we are utilizing these funds in a manner that benefits the LEPC. To accomplish this, we must be sure we are addressing an identified threat, whether through progressive planning or meeting quality criteria. Are we providing for an increase in the amount or quality of LEPC habitat? Providing financial assistance for water tanks/cross fences without an accompanying prescribed grazing plan that targets LEPC habitat would not provide LEPC benefits as it is the grazing plan that achieves the benefit to the LEPC. If there is a heavy infestation of mesquite in a pasture this should be the first resource concern we address since improving grazing in this pasture would not provide for use by LEPC without removal of the mesquite. Once the mesquite is removed we could address prescribed grazing and supporting practices such as water tanks/cross fences to improve grazing management.

Mesquite/Eastern Red Cedar removal: Control of moderate to heavy infestations of mesquite or cedar without removing the standing dead skeletons will not benefit the LEPC as they will still avoid use of this pasture. In order to provide for inclusion of payment for removal of the skeletons a payment scenario needs to be developed including the appropriate chemical/other treatment followed up by the physical removal. Payment schedule teams should be made aware of the need to provide a 314 payment scenario applicable to this treatment. A similar payment scenario should be developed for cedar skeleton removal. Coordination of payment schedules should take place across regions to ensure uniform practice/payment scenarios are available throughout the five Initiative states. Please be sure the individuals assisting with payment schedule development in your state are aware of these concerns.



Don't let the little things get in your way of success - Fences and water troughs: Get creative when it comes to issues of ramps in tanks and marking fences—simply let producers know that alleviating additional mortality adds up when conducted across the range. Also look to creative ways to implement the practice - motivate your local FFA chapter, Boy Scouts, etc., (who all need volunteer hours) to rise to the challenge of taking on these tasks—this will alleviate the burden to the rancher and you!

Things to remember:

- 1) The greatest fear landowners have: federal regulation
- 2) NRCS staff are the most trusted people working in the conservation of private lands
- 3) 95% of LEPC range is in producers hands
- 4) NRCS has the tools and technology to improve LEPC habitat

WE HAVE THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS!!! GO FORTH AND DO GOOD!