

Thirsty for Life

A Look at the Lesser Prairie-Chicken



Imagine what it would be like to have your homeland shackled with heat and fire and your food supply quickly diminishing, leaving you without the resources and shelter needed to keep your family alive.

That is precisely what it would feel like to be a Lesser Prairie-Chicken during the recent drought.

The Lesser Prairie-Chicken is an upland bird that is a candidate for listing as an endangered or threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The bird is found only in five states across the U.S.; Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas.

According to the USDA Natural Resource and Conservation Service's Wildlife Management Habitat Institute, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken population has decreased in number and range significantly since the 1800s.

Manuel De Leon, NRCS wildlife biologist for the Panhandle and Southern High Plains Texas region, said he fears the harsh weather is having a negative effect on the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, as well as many other species of native wildlife.

"Not just the bird," De Leon said, "but wildlife in general is suffering due to the drought."

De Leon said wildlife professionals have spotted instances of migratory birds traveling far beyond their normal migration route in search of food and water during the last couple years.

According to the NRCS website, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken's diet consists of insects, seeds, leaves, and buds of forbs. Which means without adequate rainfall these birds could be fighting a losing battle.

Wildlife biologist Russell Martin from Texas Parks and Wildlife said the drought is only a secondary factor to the bird's decline. New developments and increases in agricultural technology have lessened the amount of prairie

land available leading to habitat loss, habitat fragmentation and habitat degradation. These factors, combined with the recent drought, have been rough on the chickens, but the Lesser Prairie-Chicken is a resilient specie.

"We'll see a decline in their numbers the years following droughts," Martin said, "but as soon as the drought breaks, that next year their populations will bounce right back to what they were pre-drought."

During uncertain times, De Leon said it is even more important for producers to utilize all resources available to them. All services offered through NRCS are completely voluntary, and producers always have the final voice in deciding what opportunities will best fit their operation. Although he said most producers do not come to NRCS seeking to improve the living conditions for native wildlife, it is often a secondary benefit.

"As a federal agency we have different programs that help target specific practices to try to improve rangeland resources," De Leon said, "of course our first and foremost program is technical assistance."

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is the most commonly utilized program offered through NRCS. There is also the EQIP Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) Working Lands for Wildlife that focuses specifically on managing range resources to improve cattle production and Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat.

"Our agency is trying to target efforts to try to improve the habitat," De Leon said, "and keep the bird from being listed as threatened or endangered." 🍷

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