

Being Threatened

Survival. A seemingly simple concept that most would agree with as an outcome we should strive for. For many, it's hard to imagine opposition to helping preserve a species from becoming extinct. In the case of the Lesser Prairie Chicken (LPC), the opposition is not a question of if but of how best to manage its survival. At Texas Tech University researchers are working towards a solution to make everyone happy.

The Lesser Prairie Chicken is a unique game bird. It is small in stature and lives off the land. It also is unique for its interesting mating call. Males gather in a breeding ground area known as a "Lek" and perform elaborate courtship displays before the female selects her mate. These displays involve inflating the male's red throat sacs, raising their neck and tail feathers and making short jumps in the air.

Over the past decade the Chicken also has become a vanishing species. It belongs to the prairie grouse species of the southern high plains of the United States and is native to the Texas Panhandle and the Llano Estacado. On average the LPC is 15-16 inches tall and weighs between 22-29 ounces. In 1995 the U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service added the Lesser Prairie Chicken to the candidate species that warranted consideration for protection under the authority of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. In late 2012 the FWS proposed the listing of the Lesser Prairie Chicken as a "threatened" species under the ESA.

On March 27th the USFWS officially announced the listing of the Lesser Prairie Chicken as a "threatened" species.

Texas Tech University Scientists have been studying the Lesser Prairie Chicken extensively over the past 30 years. Dr. Blake Grisham, a climate modeling and statistical analysis scientist, is one of the leading researchers of the

Lesser Prairie Chicken at Texas Tech. Dr. Grisham research has spanned more than 10 years, and looks into, the effects of grazing and herbicide treatment as well as the impact of large scale drought monitoring and precipitation patterns.

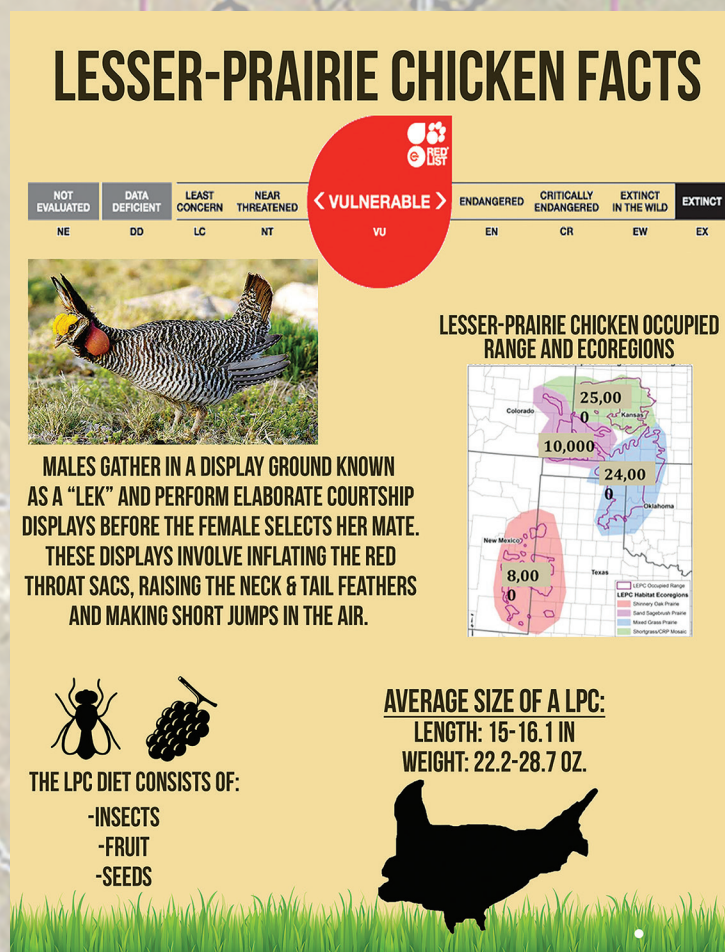
"The first population crash hit between 1990 and 1996. We don't know why and that is what my research is trying to figure out. We think it's a combination of changes in agricultural practices to a dry land crop and the drought. In 1989 to 1990 two doctors studying

the LPC estimated over a million birds in the same area where I am studying them today." Says Blake Grisham. And now populations are less than 12,000 individuals in all of Texas.

The effect of declining numbers of the Lesser Prairie Chicken isn't just on the side of the chicken. As a result of the recent listing decision, the provisions of the Endangered Species Act could restrict landowners and how they are able to use their land if the chicken is present on their property. Eighty-four ranch owners in the panhandle and rolling planes have currently enrolled in 614,250 acres in conservation agreements designed to protect habitat and breeding. The total acreage included in these agreements, known as Candidate Conservation Agreements with assurances or CCAA; represent the largest

landowner commitment to conserve a rare species in Texas History.

Controversy over the listing of the LPC under the Endangered Species Act has been growing and landowners are encouraged to explore all their options to obtain some form of regulatory protection or risk the possibility of running afoul of the provisions of the ESA. The CCAA is an agreement between the Fish and Wildlife Services and the property owners, which provides property owners who voluntarily agree to manage their lands or waters to



remove threats to candidate species and still be able to use their land productively. It is just one of several options that exist for landowners that want to gain some form of regulatory protection.

The ESA can place restrictions on land use activity in and around the protected habitat leaving landowners with exposures to legal sanctions if they harm or harass a listed species. But there are options that can help landowners and then allow them to continue to use their land.


Multiple programs will allow for ranchers and property owners to enlist in the plans to help prevent the LPC recover and avoid extinction. These plans include the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), and several offerings from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The Conservation Reserve Program protects millions of acres of topsoil from erosion and is designed to safeguard the nation's natural resources. Acreage enrolled in the CRP is planted to conserve the vegetation making the program a large contributor to wildlife populations. In 2011 the USDA approved reallocation of 153,972 acres through the CRP to support conservation and restoration of important habitat for the Lesser Prairie Chicken.

Technical assistance have been made available through the USDA NRCS "Working Lands for Wildlife" program, which can help ranchers maintain their operations within the lesser prairie chicken habitat.

The CCAA agreements mentioned earlier were available to landowners prior to a listing decision and allow enrolled property owners to manage their land consistent with approved conservation measures. The end results are multiple options though which landowners can still use their land and productively work within the ESA to benefit the LPC.

The NRCS and "Working Lands For Wildlife" program provides technical assistance to ranchers and producers in managing LPC habitat on their properties. NRCS also provides assistance through the Lesser Prairie Chicken initiative, which is a program that provides funding to help restore the population of seven game birds with most of the concentration on the LPC.

Shawn Wade, Director of Policy analysis and research with Plains Cotton Growers, Inc. says, "Through these programs, landowners can receive assurances that their conservation efforts will avoid future regulatory encroachments greater than those included in the agreements they sign." 

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