



LESSER-PRAIRIE CHICKEN CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT

Program Review And Recommendations For Success

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2017
Version 1.0

Lesser prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) populations are at or near all-time lows with an estimated 97% decline in populations and a 92% decline in rangewide occupancy. Estimated populations from the last half-century of over 200,000 birds have reached lows of approximately 20,000 birds in 2013 and have recently seen a slight recovery to approximately 33,000 birds. Based on the severe reduction in habitat availability and historically low populations, the North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) is extremely concerned about the future of lesser prairie-chickens.

This report outlines the results of a review of lesser prairie-chicken (LPC) conservation programs by the NAGP and makes recommendations for changes, revisions and additions to ensure successful conservation of the species and their habitats. NAGP has determined that ***overall; the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Rangewide Plan (RWP) remains a solid conservation strategy for the management of LPC but needs to be revised in order to be more successful in the near-term. The RWP needs to prioritize conservation efforts in a more focused manner and guide all LPC conservation programs so that current needs for LPC can be met, ensure better coordination amongst programs, and ensure all stakeholders have a seat at the table.***

At the current time, LPC conservation is in a “recovery” mode and efforts and program implementation should reflect that reality. Having adequate funding to complete needed actions is a key to success and additional funding from numerous sources is needed. Conservation actions need to be less opportunistic and more strategic with all parties working together for mutual goals. Increased priority needs to be given to establishing a more strategic system of core conservation areas patterned after strongholds within each ecoregion. These core areas should serve as anchors for current and future conservation efforts and to provide refugia for populations during contraction due to drought or continued loss and degradation of existing habitat. All LPC conservation efforts must be embraced and incentivized to increase the amount of actions being implemented and decrease the threat of listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Although LPC populations have stabilized over the past 3 years, LPC are recovering from all time historic low populations and the status of the species will remain uncertain until additional droughts are experienced. Therefore, efforts and actions that focuses on protecting and enhancing core populations and habitat need to be the highest priority.

Mitigating the impacts from energy development is still a priority and WAFWA’s Mitigation Framework and other mitigation programs can offset current impacts from enrolled companies to LPC habitat. However, impacts from non-participating companies are exceeding those that are participating. Grazing and range management are key tools for habitat management and must provide enough nesting, brood-rearing and security habitat. A strategic approach needs to be combined with increased funding, better collaboration amongst programs, and participation from landowners and other stakeholders who are not currently participating in any LPC program. This will lead to the ***right actions*** at the ***right place*** at the ***right time*** for the ***right cost*** for a ***successful outcome*** for LPC conservation.

NAGP recommends five overall areas be addressed to increase the likelihood of successful LPC conservation:

- 1. Increased funding for LPC conservation from numerous sources**
- 2. Strategic application of LPC actions to focus limited resources (conservation triage and targeting) through a delineated system of finer scale core conservation areas**
- 3. Better coordination among all conservation actors and actions**
- 4. Increased transparency for public conservation**
- 5. Consistent application of science and management, with rapid incorporation of new information**

NAGP also identified additional specific recommendations that can help improve conservation actions and their delivery:

- A. *Create a Lesser Prairie-Chicken Stakeholders Executive Oversight Group*
- B. *Establish consistent application of conservation practices that benefit LPC*
- C. *Establish consistent regulatory guidance for LPC programs and actions*
- D. *Evaluate and develop policy and protocol for allowing “stacking” of conservation programs in targeted areas*
- E. *Develop a more rigorous adaptive-management approach*
- F. *Evaluate and adjust costs of conservation actions based on outcomes and represent a fair market condition for all parties. Adjust analytical tools for evaluating habitat quality and develop outcome-based metrics for determining success of conservation efforts*
- G. *Standardize and simplify the reporting of mitigation systems and make them more “user-friendly”*
- H. *Evaluate the effectiveness of the WAFWA Mitigation Framework for delivery of strategic conservation actions*
- I. *Solicit impartial reviews of data and reports on a recurring basis*
- J. *Establish a science-based public relations campaign supporting LPC conservation efforts that benefits all conservation efforts and stakeholders.*
- K. *Embrace conservation banking and private investment into the LPC conservation strategy.*

These recommendations will allow for conservation programs to meet the current goals for LPC conservation which NAGP defines as:

- Recovered LPC populations rangewide, with no threat of listing;
- State leadership and control of LPC conservation;
- Range expansion and restoration of LPC habitats;
- Increased habitat function on existing and restored habitats; and
- Continued strategic voluntary conservation efforts and opportunities for all.

The North American Grouse Partnership is a Key Voice for grouse in North America whose mission is to promote the conservation of grouse and the habitats necessary for survival and reproduction