



Lesser Prairie Chickens Need Our Help

The North American Grouse Partnership Says We Know How To Deliver It

NEWS RELEASE

May 26, 2021

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The US Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) has determined that lesser prairie chickens warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. Habitat loss and fragmentation have caused declines of up to 90% from historic levels across southwestern Great Plains prairie ecosystems.

“This announcement is emblematic of the loss of prairie habitats across North America, making prairies the most threatened ecosystem on the continent,” said Ted Koch, Executive Director of the North American Grouse Partnership. “The decline of chickens is consistent with unprecedented loss of other grassland birds, pollinators, and other prairie ecosystem functions including soil health, water quality and even carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change.”

“Private landowners generously steward roughly 95% of the last best places in southern Great Plains prairie ecosystems and remaining lesser prairie chicken habitat, and are key to their future,” Ted said. “Their proactive efforts, with the option of voluntary participation in various incentive-based programs, including US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Bill programs, can turn the tide of habitat loss into habitat gain as has been demonstrated before.”

“Implementation of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in western Kansas over the previous decades has helped provide hundreds of thousands of acres of healthy native prairie habitat that now support 70% of the remaining populations of lesser prairie chickens. Rededicating ourselves to this and other existing and new programs with willing landowners will reduce and remove threats and enhance prairie ecosystems,” he said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently took steps to improve grassland conservation with willing private landowners, as demonstrated through the new Great Plains Grasslands Framework and important changes to the CRP that were recently announced. “We ask that USDA place an emphasis on implementing these program improvements in the southern Great Plains because of the urgent needs here, represented by the serious decline of lesser prairie chickens,” Ted said.

Because of the extensive threats to prairie grassland ecosystems, all native prairie grouse in North America have either been extirpated or are declining. Heath hens are extinct and Attwater’s prairie chicken are critically endangered. Greater sage-grouse are increasingly threatened, and greater prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse are declining.

“We urge key private landowners and leadership at all levels including the, states, federal government, Native American Tribes, industry, conservation bankers, private conservation groups and Congress to develop and implement a collaborative, strategic, focused approach to southern Great Plains and lesser prairie chicken conservation to protect our last, best places. We can do this, as we’ve previously demonstrated in western Kansas. And with new approaches such as the North American Grasslands Conservation Act idea, led by the National Wildlife Federation and others, we could make even greater gains for our beleaguered prairies,” Ted said.

“With the leadership of generous, thoughtful private landowners, we know what to do, where, and how to save prairie ecosystems. All that remains is our collective willingness to fund and implement necessary actions in support of these willing landowners leading the way in protecting native prairie habitats and all their values,” Ted said.

With the vast majority of remaining chicken habitat on private land, the Endangered Species Act announcement by the Service today represents more of an opportunity for private landowners than a regulatory threat. As a former endangered species biologist who worked for the agency for 30 years, Ted said, “There is no way the Service will regulate chickens to recovery on private lands. Full species and ecosystem recovery will only happen on a voluntary basis with willing landowners. Fortunately, the Service and others are well positioned to help interested landowners implement conservation and gain regulatory assurances here.”

The North American Grouse Partnership is a 501(c)(3) organization. Formed in 1999, our mission is to promote the conservation of grouse and the habitats necessary for their survival and reproduction.