



## habitat management of the lesser-prairie chicken

There are a number of tools we can use to manage and improve lesser prairie-chicken habitat. Most of them are designed to restore or replicate the natural forces or disturbances that shaped the grasslands before human settlement, like periodic grazing and naturally occurring fire. The tools and techniques used on an individual property will be different, as every place and set of circumstances is unique and will require a unique combination of tools. For meaningful results these tools need to be integrated into a comprehensive habitat management or conservation plan developed in partnership with a natural resource professional.

**Prescribed Grazing** involves developing and implementing a plan that balances available forage between the needs of livestock and wildlife including lesser prairie-chickens. A good grazing plan will include inventories of forage, fences and available watering sites as the basis for the plan.

**Invasive Species Management** involves appropriate removal of upland trees such as cedar and mesquite, and harmful herbaceous invaders such as cheat grass. Additionally this helps maintain and manage shinnery oak, plum and sand sage areas which are important habitat areas for the lesser prairie-chicken.

**Prescribed Burning** is a technique applied to a specific area to achieve a specific purpose and according to a plan prepared with the assistance of a qualified professional. Prescribed burns can be used to control invasive plants, remove decadent vegetation, allow new growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs, and enrich the soil. Most appropriate in the late winter or early spring, burns are designed in small enough units that no more than 35% of the rangeland is burned annually. This tool is not useful in dunes due to erosion risks.

**Native Grassland Restoration** involves replanting croplands and other disturbed sites with regionally appropriate mixtures of grasses and forbs (broad-leaved plants) such as Illinois Bundleflower and Gayfeather.



**Fallow Disking or Aeration** promotes broad-leaved, seed-producing forbs for lesser prairie-chickens. Additionally this practice produces enhanced insect areas for chicks by disturbing small, widely distributed areas with a tractor drawn disk or aerator during the dormant season.

**Cropland Management** utilizes minimum tillage techniques to leave grain stubble and waste grain on the surface during the winter and early spring. Examples would be (depending on where you live) delayed plowing until March 1, leaving vegetated margins on the field perimeters as possible, and including crops useful to lesser prairie-chickens food source, such as alfalfa, wheat, grain, sorghum and oats.



**Restoration of impacted sites** refers to re-establishment of sites in the Southern Great Plains impacted by oil and gas exploration, wind power generation and transmission. These activities can result in habitat fragmentation and loss, yet be remediated in some cases with utilization of best-management practices and site-specific restoration plans designed in partnership with a professional natural resource professional.

**Long Term Habitat Conservation Federal Programs** can be utilized such as the *Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)* to keep erodible land in permanent cover and earn a rental payment in exchange.

**Conservation easements**, such as those funded through USDA-NRCS, private land trusts, or state specific purchase programs can keep working lands working – for both wildlife and livestock, as well as provide long-term conservation and preservation.

**Inter-seeding:** Older CRP fields planted to monocultures of exotic species, such as Old World Bluestem and other areas of limited vegetative diversity can be improved for lesser prairie-chicken and other wildlife by over-seeding with a mixture of native grass and forb species. In some cases, as with many of these tools, there is cost-share funding available to assist with implementation.

**Fence Management, Marking and Removal:** Fences can be lethal to lesser prairie-chickens in flight, particularly in close proximity to leks, or breeding grounds. In some parts of their range, the density of fences is considered a problem for adult mortality. Limiting permanent fencing to only what is absolutely necessary for management, use of movable single strand electric fence, removing unused fence and marking of fence wire in close proximity to active leks with visible plastic tags – are all methods to reduce the risk of fences to lesser prairie-chickens in flight.

**Water Development:** Lesser prairie-chickens do not necessarily need to consume surface water but will use it when available. Development of additional water sources may contribute to better livestock distribution which can enhance a manager’s ability to meet forage goals for both livestock and wildlife. Water overflows at watering facilities can also help produce more diverse and abundant vegetation at those sites which can create additional “bugging” habitats for chicks foraging for food. Additionally, escape ladders installed in water troughs are thought to provide protection from lesser prairie-chickens drowning in some areas.