

Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative Report

February 2012



Background/ Purpose

Lesser prairie-chicken populations have declined dramatically during the past several decades due to loss of native prairie, habitat fragmentation, and degradation of habitat on both private and public lands. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), its partners and cooperating

landowners are working to increase the number and the range of the lesser prairie-chicken through the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI). At the same time, the initiative is promoting the overall health of grazing lands and the long-term sustainability of ranching operations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has worked cooperatively with NRCS to ensure the initiative's conservation practices provide long-term benefits to the overall lesser prairie-chicken population; minimize or eliminate short-term harmful effects to those populations, and cause no negative effects to other listed and candidate species that share habitat with the lesser prairie-chicken.

NRCS State Conservationists in Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas (states within the lesser prairie-chicken's range), with the assistance of their respective State Technical Committees, have identified high-priority target areas for effective implementation of NRCS programs that will aid in the protection, enhancement and expansion of suitable habitat.

Did You Know?

- The lesser prairie-chicken is a ground-nesting bird native to the rangelands of the south central plains of the U.S. and best known for its unique courtship displays and “booming” sounds.
- A lek is an area where lesser prairie-chicken males display during the breeding season to attract females; may also be referred to as a booming ground or strutting ground.
- The lesser prairie-chicken is comparable in morphology, plumage and behavior to the greater prairie-chicken, although the lesser prairie-chicken is smaller and has distinctive courtship displays and vocalizations.
- Grassland birds are among the most threatened wildlife guilds in North America.

- The current range for the lesser prairie-chicken is reduced to relatively small and scattered areas totaling about 8 percent of its historic range.
- As of January 2012, the lesser prairie-chicken population has been estimated at 30,000-45,000.

Goals/Objectives Achieved

The initiative is designed to increase the abundance and distribution of the lesser prairie-chicken and its habitat, while promoting the overall health of grazing lands and the long-term sustainability of ranching operations. Measurable outcomes include:

- Management and enhancement of the current habitat;
- Decreased threats to the species from agricultural activities; and
- Education of the public about the needs of the species.

NRCS is monitoring responses of habitat to conservation practices, while state wildlife agencies are monitoring lesser prairie-chicken populations by counts of birds attending lek sites.

Conservation Funding/ Practices Applied

The initiative provides financial and technical assistance to landowners and operators for reducing threats to the species, and for enhancing and maintaining existing habitats in high priority areas. The initiative is funded by NRCS through its Conservation Technical Assistance Program (CTA), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP).

Initiative participants receive technical and financial assistance to implement supporting conservation practices including prescribed grazing, brush management, and prescribed burning to maintain and improve upland wildlife and rangeland habitats. Range planting and restoration of rare and declining habitats can also create additional habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

Participation/Partnership Successes

NRCS and the National Fish and Wildlife Federation (NFWF) have jointly created a Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) to protect and enhance lesser prairie-chicken habitat. Partners in the effort include:

- Colorado Division of Wildlife;
- Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism;
- Kansas Forest Service,
- New Mexico Department of Game and Fish;
- Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation;
- Texas Parks and Wildlife Department;
- LPC Interstate Working Group;
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation;
- National Wildlife Foundation;
- Pheasants Forever;
- Playa Lakes Joint Venture;
- Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory;
- The Woods Foundation;
- Texas Wildlife Association; and
- The Nature Conservancy.

Through 300 contracts, totaling \$11 million in FY 2011 funding, producers have established or improved 458,000 acres of habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken. This targeted approach also helps producers sustain their operations, which in turn, supports rural economies.

Benefits to Producers

In addition to receiving financial and technical assistance for implementing conservation practices that benefit the lesser prairie-chicken, initiative participants will improve overall range conditions and the sustainability of their ranching operations. Participants are learning that what is good for the lesser prairie-chicken is also good for sustainable ranching.

Benefits to Public

The lesser prairie-chicken has been a treasured plains icon for centuries. Their beauty and distinctive mating rituals provide some of the best wildlife viewing in our nation, allowing communities, farmers, ranchers, and bed and breakfasts to offer tours and photo opportunities. By improving their habitat, ranchers are working to ensure that future generations of Americans will be able to experience these remarkable birds. Plus, the conservation activities implemented as part of the initiative help protect soil, water and plant resources – leading to the improved productivity and sustainability of the region's agricultural producers.

Colorado

Colorado Partnership for Lesser Prairie-Chicken

In Colorado, the initiative is benefiting from extensive partnership efforts. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) and Pheasants Forever (PF) assisted with prairie chicken population counts following the implementation of habitat improvement practices. Colorado Conservation Districts (CCD), PF, RMBO and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) are working hand-in-hand with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to identify and confirm eligibility of any potential state acres for wildlife enhancement on expiring eligible Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land that could be considered for lesser prairie-chicken habitat enhancement funded practices. These practices include planting permanent native grasses and forbs – and the CCD is working with USFWS' Partners for Wildlife to supply supplemental forb and legume seed at no cost to those CRP participants.

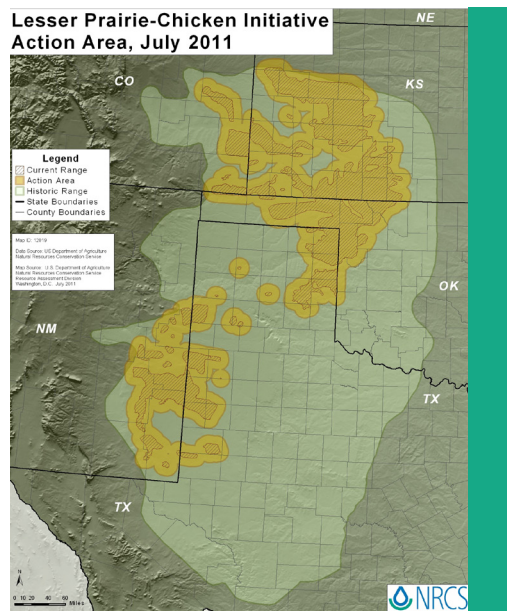
Many of the partners are also working together to purchase, cut and distribute fence markers to landowners participating in the initiative. This practice makes the fences more visible to the birds, and reduces bird mortality due to fence line collisions.

Kansas

Beginning Farmer Improves Habitat, Range through Initiative

James Mills is a beginning farmer who had concerns about the health of his rangeland. His 160 acres were not being evenly grazed, which resulted in a reduction in productivity and in the quality of lesser prairie-chicken habitat. This past year, Mills applied and received funding through NRCS's Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program as part of the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative. NRCS conservation professionals determined that he should install a cross fence to allow the rangeland to rest, resulting in improved wildlife habitat and an improvement in the overall grazing patterns.

Mills installed the fence shortly after the contract was approved and is now following plans for prescribed grazing and upland wildlife habitat management. He says he is pleased with NRCS help in planning and the cross fencing and hopes that with more moisture following the 2011 severe drought in southwest Kansas, he will soon see an improvement in the rangeland and the lesser prairie-chicken's habitat.



Management and enhancement of habitats within the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative targeted priority areas displayed above.



EQIP/WHIP funds help improve and increase lesser prairie-chicken habitat in Kansas.



Good rangeland management benefits lesser prairie-chicken habitat in New Mexico.

The comments gathered during this process helped NRCS establish the habitat practices to be approved for initiative funding in Oklahoma. In addition, the two “Ranch Conversation” sessions also increased interest in NRCS’ other conservation programs, generating more than \$900,000 in funding assistance covering about 28,000 acres.

New Mexico

Partnerships Forged to Monitor and Evaluate Conservation Efforts

New Mexico NRCS has partnered with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever to create a team of specialists to assist landowners and NRCS field offices with lesser prairie-chicken conservation on rangelands.

This partnership provides habitat specialists in biology and rangeland management to assist in conducting range and habitat inventories, grazing plans, outreach and education, and will assist in the monitoring and evaluation of applied conservation practices. As a result of the team’s efforts, ranchers and conservationists will have a better understanding of the impacts of conservation activities, and will be able to more effectively prescribe, target and implement future conservation efforts that will benefit the health and productivity of rangeland and lesser prairie-chickens.

Oklahoma

“Ranch Conversations” Set Stage for Rangeland Solutions

NRCS in Oklahoma recently used “Ranch Conversations,” a moderator-led, neutral discussion process, to bring initiative partners and stakeholders together to discuss rangeland and habitat issues and to seek acceptable solutions to those issues.

More than 200 partners, landowners, public officials and media representatives attended two different sessions to hear information on issues including lesser prairie-chicken candidate species status; what that status means for landowners; and specific conservation programs recommended for improving lesser prairie-chicken habitat.

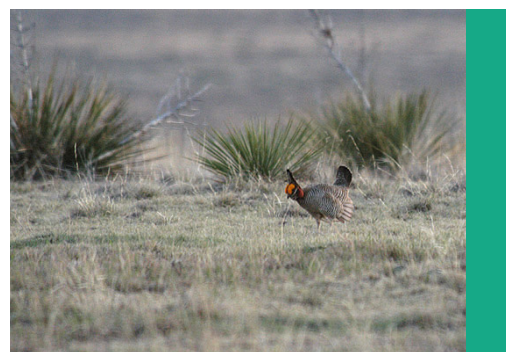
Texas

Strategic Partnership Puts “Boots on the Ground”

Ranchers and biologists agree—voluntary conservation and management of grasslands is an effective way to support lesser prairie-chicken habitat. But additional expertise has been needed to help the growing number of landowners interested in wildlife conservation.

Fortunately, the Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) partnership in Texas developed a plan that is being implemented to provide much-needed wildlife conservation technical assistance expertise. The partnership includes NRCS, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Playa Lakes Joint Venture and Pheasants Forever. The team devised the plan to provide additional outreach and technical assistance as they implement the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative in Texas. Additional, non-monetary support is being provided by the Texas Wildlife Association and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help carry out the plan.

NRCS has provided the team with funding through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. As a result, three new wildlife biologists were hired and now serve in the initiative’s action area of Texas, which is in the high plains. These biologists will accomplish the partnership’s goal of “putting more boots on the ground” to provide technical assistance to private landowners who want to create or enhance habitat for lesser prairie-chickens.



A Texas partnership puts more biologists in the high plains of Texas to help fulfill landowner demand for technical assistance to apply conservation practices that support lesser prairie-chicken habitat. (Photo courtesy of Tom Harvey, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department)

Fiscal Year 2011 Funding Provided:

FISCAL YEAR 2011 – LESSER PRAIRIE CHICKEN INITIATIVE (LPCI)

NRCS - Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts/Agreements								
LPCI	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)		Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)		Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)		State Totals for All Programs for Initiative	
STATE	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligations	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligations	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligations	Number of Contracts	FA Contract Obligations
Colorado	3	328,651	2	99,866	0	0	5	428,517
Kansas	6	525,548	39	913,159	0	0	45	1,438,707
New Mexico	17	1,313,162	0	0	0	0	17	1,313,162
Oklahoma	26	906,460	0	0	9	740,117	35	1,646,577
Texas	147	3,884,869	60	3,123,621	0	0	207	7,008,490
TOTALS	199	6,958,690	101	4,136,646	9	740,117	309	11,835,453

a) Source: EQIP data was queried from NRCS ProTracts 10/1/11 with 12/24/11 file update.

b) Source: WHIP data was queried from NRCS ProTracts 10/1/11 with 12/24/11 file update.

c) Source: GRP data was collected from State Office spreadsheets 10/19/11