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Farm Tour shows Terry County's best

Beautiful Fall day highlights annual event

Terry County was on show and Mother Nature was in fine form Thursday morning as hundreds of area citizens climbed aboard school buses and took to roads for the 57th annual Terry County Farm Tour.

The event took three buses of local growers, business people and interested citizens around the county Thursday morning, starting with a healthy habitat of one of the

areas most celebrated, and most elusive, residents -- the Lesser Prairie Chicken.

The birds are native to sand hills and more recently CRP grasslands in western Terry County.

A member of the grouse family, the Lesser Prairie Chicken is slightly smaller and paler than its near relative the Greater Prairie Chicken.

About half of its current population lives in western

Kansas, with the other half in the sand hills and prairies of western Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, the Llano Estacado of Texas, eastern New Mexico, and southeastern Colorado.

The birds have suffered in recent years due primarily to drought, but land such as that viewed on the farm tour's first stop Thursday could help keep the birds off of federal endangered species lists, according to Duane Lucina, an agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who addressed the crowd.

"The drought has had a significant impact on the birds in recent years," he said. "We have seen hens sit on their nests and then give up after a day or two. They just make the decision that it would be best to stay alive and try again next year."

The drought also has made it difficult to establish good conservation areas with enough cover to provide protection for the birds.

As many as 20,000 acres in Terry, Yoakum, Cochran and Bailey counties are part of a conservation effort to turn farm land back into native grasses so the birds can replenish their diminishing numbers.

"Most acres that go into CRP are planted with a mix of five native species of plants, Lucina said. "When we enter into the prairie chicken habitat program, we actually use a mix of 10 plants. Some that the birds live in and some that they feed on."

The agent said that while some areas of the state have seen imported fire ants move in and harm birds that nest on



The Perry and Dawn Brewer Family were honored Thursday as the 2012 Terry County Outstanding Conservation Farm Family following the annual farm tour. Pictured with the Brewers are (from left) daughter-in-law Sequin Brewer, grandchildren Hayden, Quade and Blair Bass, daughter Amber Bass and son-in-law Rob Bass.



Scott Caswell of Meadow was honored as the 2012 Terry County Outstanding Young Conservation Farmer following the annual farm tour Thursday morning. Caswell is pictured with his wife, Monica, and sons, Brady and Taylor.

the ground, such as prairie chickens, quail and pheasants, the invasive insects are not partial to this area.

The ants have been known to attack the eggs and fledglings of birds who nest on the ground.

"We have a looser soil that they don't seem to like," he said. "They like a very tight soil that isn't really found in this area and that has seemed to keep them out. That and we speculate they can't tolerate our hard winters very well."

He said some other threats to the birds include West Nile virus and the explosion in recent years of feral hog populations. In years past, a two-day hunting season has been allowed for the birds, which feature striped plumage, a black spike behind their head, bright yellow feathers on its face and an attractive orange flash on its neck.

The season was by permit only, though, and has not been allowed in recent years.

From there, the buses moved southwest to cotton fields farmed by longtime Terry County producer Monty Henson.

He addressed the crowd about how he has farmed in the past and what he considers important for the future.

"My biggest concern as a

farmer is how to return this land back to a balance where we can grow dry land cotton in all these circles that are irrigated now," he said. "We have our ground so messed up over the years, we have to get ready for farming without all this water. That's my priority. Mark my word, each year, we are going to be planting more and more dry land acreage."

Henson said water conservation and farm management can actually be more profitable for farmers.

"I've found out that you can't make any money irrigating a full circle of cotton and getting one bale off of it," he said. "You're better off with small plantings and more varieties of plants. Tending them better and watering them more often."

He also said weeds are more of an issue than they were in the past since chemicals like Roundup aren't as effective as they once were and suggested farmers revert to older practices of using yellow herbicides earlier in the season.

Henson finished with a positive commentary, adding that with the technologies available today, young farmers can break into the business and make a good living.

The final stop of the tour

was at Landmark Earth Solutions on the Plains Hwy.

The former cotton gin has been retrofitted and now produces a mulch mix using gin trash and other agriculture bi-products.

Guests walked through the facility and saw the proprietary equipment that produces small bales of the dry material, which when used is mixed with water to make a sprayable slurry for planting on slopes.

Other products are in the testing phases and the plant is running at 100 percent capacity.

Nine states currently are testing the product and if they all approve it (which is likely) expansion at the plant will be necessary.

Back at the First Baptist Church, hundreds of guests enjoyed a hearty barbeque meal, then watched as two local families were honored for their contribution to conservation in the area.

Scott Caswell of Meadow was named the 2012 Young Conservation Farmer of the Year, along with his wife Monica and their sons Brady and Taylor.

Perry and Dawn Brewer were named the 2012 Outstanding Conservation Farm Family of the Year. Their children and grandchildren also were in attendance.

Council works light agenda

The Brownfield City Council made quick work of an abbreviated agenda Thursday morning, convening and adjourning in under 10 minutes.

While in the brief session, the council voted to join other taxing entities in condemning and demolishing an abandoned house on 2nd Street.

The structure has been deteriorating for several years and the previous owners have signed it over to the taxing

entities.

Graffiti in the building shows signs of use by gangs and drug paraphernalia also has been found inside.

The demolition also was approved by the other taxing entities in each of their meetings earlier in the week.

In other business, the council unanimously selected the Brownfield News as the city's official newspaper of record.

The designation is required

by law as the source for public and legal notices run by the city under the Texas Freedom of Information Act and Texas Open Meetings Act.

Mayor protem Rod Bearden presided and council members present were Tom Hesse, Roxanne Barr, Geronimo Gonzales and Jackie Pinson.

Absent were Cynthia Morin, Mayor Bob Simpson and Brent Besler.

Texas tops nation in uninsured

(AP) --Texas still has the highest rate of uninsured in the nation -- one in four Texans did not have health insurance in 2011, according to data the U.S. Census Bureau released Thursday.

The Census Bureau's American Community Survey found 5.8 million Texans -- 23 percent of the population -- did not have health insurance in 2011. That includes 13 percent of children, 22 percent of women, 24 percent of men and 26 percent of the employed workforce in Texas.

In Terry County, 32.1 percent of the population is uninsured, according to the most recent Census data.

Demographers Steve Murdock and Michael Cline at the Hobby Center for the Study of Texas at

Rice University issued a report this week that estimated that if Texas implemented federal health care reform -- which Gov. Rick Perry has eschewed -- that more than half of the uninsured, about 3 million people, in the state could have coverage by 2014.

The demographers' report shows the enormous impact that federal health care reform could have for Texas families, said Anne Dunkelberg, associate director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities in a prepared statement. Dunkelberg wrote a policy brief summarizing the demographers' findings.

"Texas is projected to see the largest percentage gain in insurance coverage of any state under health care reform," she wrote.

In 2009 estimates from the U.S.

Census Bureau, 32-percent of residents in Terry County were classified as being "uninsured," according to information provided by U.S. counties to the Small Area Health Insurance Estimates (SAHIE).

Around the immediate area, Martin and Yoakum counties saw an estimated 29.3 and 29.7 percent of their county residents classified as "uninsured" respectively, according to the SAHIE report, while Andrews County reported 27.2 percent in the 2009 estimates. Gaines County has a 37-percent rate and Dawson county reported 39.9 percent estimates, while Lea County, N.M. estimates was reported at being 25.9 percent.

The demographers' report examined the impact of five major provisions in federal healthcare

reform: a health insurance exchange to inform consumers of health plan options and subsidize coverage for households up to 400 percent above the federal poverty line; insurance mandates and penalties for not purchasing health insurance; an expansion of Medicaid to cover individuals and households 138 percent below the federal poverty line; allowing young adults under 26 to stay on their parents' health plan; and tax credits for small businesses and nonprofits, which will cover at least half of premium costs for employees' health insurance coverage.

The U.S. Supreme Court decided the federal health care reform law was constitutional, but it ruled that states had the right to refuse federal funds to expand Medicaid.

Gov. Rick Perry called the federal health reform provisions "brazen intrusions into the sovereignty of our state," and he said Texas would not expand Medicaid or set up a state-run health insurance exchange. Perry said he looked forward to implementing other health care solutions, but he did not specify what those would be.

Caring for uninsured Texans is a multi-billion dollar annual expense for Texas businesses and the state health care system. Texas hospitals absorbed \$5 billion for uncompensated care to uninsured patients in 2010, according to the Texas Hospital Association.

Taxpayers and the insured ultimately pay those billions, said John Hawkins, senior vice president for government relations at the Texas

Hospital Association. To make ends meet, hospitals either have to increase local taxes or negotiate higher compensation rates from insurers.

"That creates a vicious cycle, particularly for the individual and the small employer market," said Hawkins. "Those shifted costs make the premium that much more unaffordable, which just adds to the uninsured."

Texas hospitals have already helped finance federal health care reform by absorbing \$14 billion in funding cuts to Medicare and other hospital reimbursements, he said.

"If we don't take advantage of [the federal reforms], that money would potentially go to other states or just lapse," said Hawkins.

Sat 9/22	Sun 9/23	Mon 9/24	Tue 9/25	Wed 9/26



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