

# Fish and Wildlife Services reopen prairie chicken public comment

DALLAS (AP) — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reopened to public comment the potential listing of the lesser prairie chicken on the federal protected list.

U.S. Rep. Michael Conaway of Texas announced the move after he and seven other prairie House Republicans requested a delay of at least 90 days in the decision on designating the grouse as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Republican senators, including U.S. Sens. John Cornyn and Ted Cruz of Texas, also asked for the delay.

They say protecting the fowl would impair oil and gas development, agriculture and other sectors that drive local economies.

Experts say the lesser prairie chicken population has declined in part due to expanded farms, ranches and oil and gas operations across the Southwest and other states.

US District 19 Congressman Randy Neugebauer (R-Lubbock) responded to the letter from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Director Daniel Ashe regarding the potential listing of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

"The Fish and Wildlife Service took a step in the right direction on the lesser prairie-chicken listing, but unfortunately, they didn't go far enough," Neugebauer stated.

Director Ashe agreed to reopen the comment period so stakeholders could review the widely supported conservation plan proposed by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA). However, he declined to extend the final listing deadline.

"Allowing stakeholders to comment on the range-wide conservation plan is critical, and I'm glad Director Ashe recognized this," Neugebauer said. "But I let him know that I was disappointed that he didn't choose to extend the final dead-

line for making a decision on whether or not to list the species. That creates a shortened review period that doesn't account for the complexity of this proposal. And it means the Service is still following arbitrary deadlines based on litigation, rather than examining what makes the most sense for local conservation efforts."

Listing the lesser prairie-chicken as threatened will have sweeping consequences for landowners in West Texas and neighboring states.

Neugebauer thanked residents of West Texas for their active involvement in this issue, and urged them to stay engaged. "Farmers, ranchers, landowners, and energy producers have all come together to take part in this process," Neugebauer stated. "Thanks to their efforts, we're making progress."

The Lesser Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*) a species in the grouse family, 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 sandhills and prairies of western Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, the Llano Estacado region of Texas and eastern New Mexico, and southeastern Colorado.

Texas counties which are home to the lesser prairie chicken habitat include: Ochiltree, Lipscomb, Roberts, Hemphill, Gray, Wheeler, Donley, Deaf Smith, Bailey, Lamb, Cochran, Hockley, Yoakum, Terry, Andrews, and Gaines.

**Recent Study Findings**  
Through a multi-state collaborative effort, the first statistically-valid, range-wide population estimate for the lesser prairie chicken is an estimated 37,170 birds, according to a report released by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (WAFWA) Grassland Initiative and the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group.

Aerial surveys this spring detected several previously unknown breeding areas, known as leks, despite severe drought conditions across the region last year. They also discovered leks in Kansas beyond what was thought to be the northern limit of the historic range of the species.

Lesser prairie chicken numbers have been largely increasing in Kansas for the last 15 years, while populations have declined in parts of the southern portion of the range, including Texas. Biologists believe this expansion may represent a northward shift in the population of the species caused by climatic conditions associated with changing precipitation patterns.

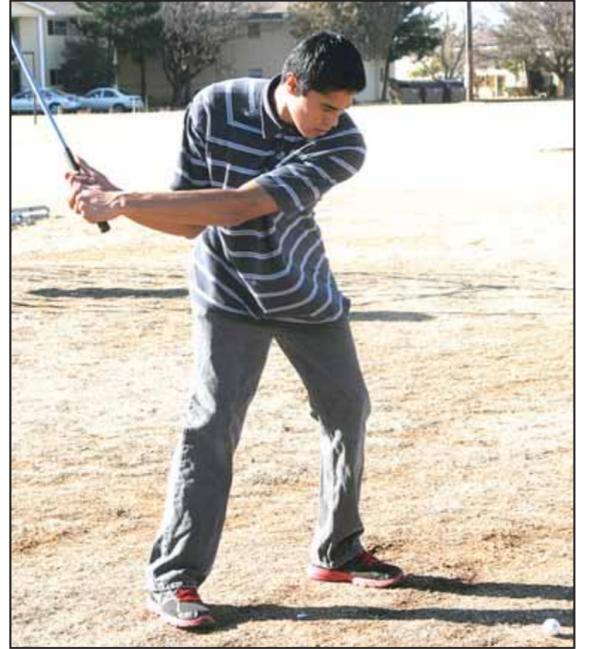
To help restore habitat for the bird, state and federal experts developed a tool called Candidate Conservation Agreement with

Assurances (CCAA) to work with private landowners and managers in the geographic range of the lesser prairie-chicken.

This voluntary program was designed to help reverse declining bird numbers by promoting habitat conservation and restoration through practices such as prescribed grazing, upland wildlife habitat management, brush management, prescribed burning, range planting and restoration and management of rare or declining habitats.

The program also provides assurances to landowners that, beyond what is detailed in the CCAA agreement, they will not be required to meet any new regulations if the bird is listed under the Endangered Species Act.

To date, close to 315,000 acres of Texas ranch land have enrolled in CCAAs.



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