

# Progress for Lesser Prairie-Chickens in New Mexico

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The New Mexico Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently issued Interim Guidance to provide protections for the Lesser Prairie-Chicken (LPC) and the Sand Dune Lizard in New Mexico. Both species are of special concern to the BLM and have been identified as special status species by the agency. The two special status species currently are listed as warranted but precluded from listing under the Endangered Species Act. New Mexico is considering listing the Sand Dune Lizard as endangered in the state.

The BLM has been concerned about populations of the LPC as far back as the 1970s when they commissioned a study through New Mexico State University (NMSU), conducted by the NMSU Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Science.

They found that nesting and brood-rearing cover (a mixture of shinnery oak and tall grasses) was in very poor condition on lands administered by the BLM in eastern New Mexico. Since that time, oil and gas developments have expanded throughout the area, and the BLM has responded by attempting to protect critical breeding areas.

A controversy is brewing now over the BLM Interim Guidance involving the designation of special status species for the prairie chicken and lizard. The agency is proposing four mineral leasing categories in the area occupied by the two species, primarily designed to constrain gas and oil development operations in the shinnery-oak habitat area of southeast New Mexico.

The oil and gas industry has indicated that they understand the need for these actions to conserve the habitat and the species, but they believe the new rules will slow the process to gain approval to develop the oil and gas resources available on public land. Interest by the NM Congressional delegation before the new guidance becomes final is likely.

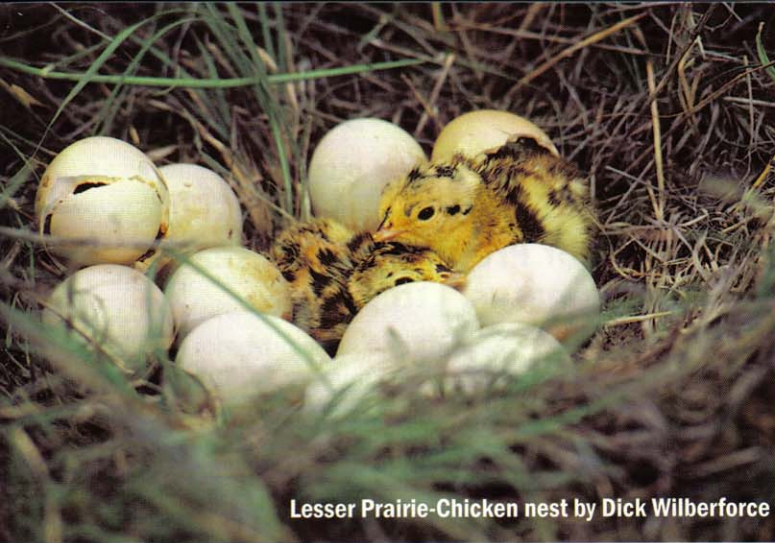
The oil and gas industry also has been part of a stakeholder group that has been working over the last year and a half on alternatives that conserve the species. The Southeast New Mexico Lesser Prairie-Chicken Working Group is expected to produce a conservation strategy that will include several recommendations to conserve and protect habitats for the prairie chicken and lizard. When completed, the group intends to present the strategy to the BLM so it may be used when they develop the Resource Management Plan for the area. They also hope to work with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to assist them in improving LPC habitat on private land through their \$1.2 million Landowner Incentive Program grant from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. At least half of the LIP funds are to be used to improve LPC habitat.

Lesser Prairie-Chickens also have a more secure block of habitat in eastern New Mexico. Recently, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) bought an 18,500-acre ranch near Milnesand, NM, about 30 miles south of Portales. The ranch has what likely is the highest known density of prairie chicken breeding grounds on the eastern New Mexico plains, and the purchase will almost double the number of acres protected for the rare birds in the state. TNC will lease the grazing rights back to the sellers so they can continue to run cattle on the land.

The previous owners used a rest-rotational grazing system on the ranch, and the shinnery oak-grassland appears to have



Lesser Prairie-Chicken by Dick Wilberforce



Lesser Prairie-Chicken nest by Dick Wilberforce

done well. The US Fish and Wildlife Service's NM Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program have committed considerable funding over the past several years to monitor prairie chicken leks and habitat on the property. They are finding that the LPC and the rest-rotational grazing system employed on the ranch are quite compatible.

This purchase will be The Nature Conservancy's first acquisition in eastern New Mexico and an important step in its effort to protect grasslands, which it considers the most endangered ecosystem in North America.

In addition to this positive news, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in NM has approved the use of funds from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to improve LPC habitat on farms and ranches in eastern NM. EQIP funding is distributed to local work groups throughout the state. The work groups rank proposed projects submitted by farmers and ranchers and distribute funds accordingly.

At least 60% of the EQIP funds must go to livestock operations, but a local work group can opt to place a high priority on certain structural or land management practices. Three local work groups in eastern New Mexico have opted to offer annual incentive payments of up to \$7 per acre to farmers and ranchers to encourage them to improve habitat for the LPC.

Unfortunately, interest in this incentive is limited, probably because incentive payments of \$7 or less are not that attractive to most producers. Also, NRCS only offers incentive payments in EQIP for up to 3 consecutive years. Most producers are more interested in annual incentive payments like those provided by the USDA Farm Service Agency through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP payments extend for the term of the contract, and CRP contracts are for 10 or 15 years in length. Longer EQIP contracts should increase their use.

A review of the EQIP language in the 2002 Farm Bill reveals no mention of a 3-year limit on annual incentive payments, and improving fish and wildlife habitat is one of the primary purposes of the program. So, in a letter to Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman, The North American Grouse Partnership requested that the Secretary consider authorizing annual incentive payments in EQIP contracts with farmers and ranchers to encourage them to improve prairie grouse habitat.

In particular the letter mentions the use of significant periods of rest in livestock grazing systems, particularly in the arid West.

On another front, several members of the NM Lesser Prairie-Chicken Working Group support the development of a captive rearing facility. The stated purposes of a rearing facility vary among different members of the working group, and there is much to be learned yet on how to rear Lesser Prairie-Chickens in captivity. The US Department of Energy (DOE) has a facility known as the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, NM, which contains several thousand acres of reasonably good Lesser Prairie-Chicken habitat. The DOE staff at the WIPP plant is interested in managing their habitat for prairie chickens and perhaps developing a captive-rearing facility on the WIPP property. Even the energy industry leaders have expressed interest in providing funding to get such a project off the ground.

Given all these positive changes that are happening for Lesser Prairie-Chickens in New Mexico, it appears there may be a real chance to enable the recovery of the species and, hopefully, avoid a listing under the Endangered Species Act. Nothing is certain yet, and the long-term decline in numbers and distribution of LPC in NM may not lend itself well to a rapid recovery. However, if everyone pulls together, as most appear to be doing, and if the long-term drought really is over in eastern New Mexico, then recovery of this species may be on the horizon.



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