

Can conservation banking save the lesser prairie chicken in New Mexico?

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Mack Kizer remembers seeing lesser prairie chickens on his family ranch in eastern New Mexico growing up. He said his children and grandchildren also have seen the birds on the ranch since childhood and he hopes they can continue to enjoy the unique animal's presence long into the future.

As the bird's population dwindles, Kizer's family is one of a group of landowners who have entered into agreements that allow them to be paid to preserve lesser prairie chicken habitat on their ranch.

The bird's habitat has become more and more fragmented. The birds living in eastern New Mexico and its neighboring section of Texas are now isolated from birds farther north in places like Oklahoma and Kansas.

This month, the lesser prairie chicken's southern population will join the list of animals in the United States that are considered endangered. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced in November that the bird would be added to the list. The endangered species status goes into effect 60 days after a notice is published in the Federal Register. That puts the status going into effect next week.

Making a living in the rural, eastern part of New Mexico is not always easy and drought has further complicated agricultural efforts.

Many of the residents are ranchers and farmers who, like the Kizers, have been in the area for generations.

"You're down to a relatively small number of ranchers who have this habitat in the area and they've got to be rewarded for being good stewards," said Wayne Walker, who founded Common Ground Capital.

Common Ground Capital has partnered with the Kizer family to conserve the habitat on their ranch in perpetuity. Walker said the organization is working to conserve pockets of good habitat for the lesser prairie chicken.

He said the agreements allow the ranchers to support their families and buy equipment.

“We think that it could be a game changer with the ranchers,” he said, adding that Common Ground Capital pays market price for the acres that are set aside for conservation.

The business is doing so through what is known as conservation banking, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service defines as “a market-based system for conserving species and their habitat.”

Essentially, the landowner like the Kizers enter into an agreement with an organization like Common Ground Capital as well as the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Organizations like Common Ground Capital set up an endowment to pay for the long-term operation of the property, which can include things like monitoring and management of the site. The funding for those agreements comes from selling of credits to developers and businesses to off-set their impacts.

For example, a wind farm developer could buy credits to offset the impact of the turbines on habitat.

Conservation banking is not without controversy, though it serves as one of the backbones of efforts to keep species from going extinct. [Critics say](#) there’s a lack of transparency and accounting. This can make it unclear if the programs are actually succeeding.

Conservation banking began in the 1980s in California. The first programs were focused on conserving habitat for the least tern and a species of ocean fish that lives in intertidal and subtidal habitats.

In addition to the lack of transparency, some people question [which habitats are being used for conservation banking](#) and whether that land is of low ecological value to the species or not at risk of being developed. A study published last year in the journal [Sustainability](#), found evidence of that taking place with conservation banking, though it acknowledged the role that conservation banking plays in protecting species from extinction.

But biologist Stephanie Manes said conservation banking provides something that other efforts like clearing land do not: perpetuity.

“Restoring habitat one time by itself is not a solution because the trees will come back,” she said.

Manes is the senior scientist of Grassland Conservation Services and works as a consultant for Common Ground Capital. She previously worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Current population estimates show that there are only about 500 birds in the southern population, which is found in New Mexico. The Fish and Wildlife Service has divided the bird into two distinct population segments. While the northern population is being listed as threatened, the southern population is endangered.

That is because, with only 500 birds, the southern population is much more vulnerable to extreme weather events like drought and flooding or wildfires, Manes said. In contrast, the northern population has more than 30,000 birds.

While it is called a prairie chicken, the bird is actually a grouse and is an important indicator of grassland prairie ecosystem health, she said.

Other species of prairie chickens and grouse have also experienced declines in population and habitat fragmentation, leading to loss of genetic diversity. She gave the examples of the large prairie chicken and the Gunnison sage grouse.

Grouse species like the lesser prairie chicken engage in what is called lekking. The birds gather at these leks where the males display through dancing. Usually only a few males are chosen to mate with the females.

As habitat becomes more and more fragmented, the islands of prairie chicken communities see genetic diversity shrink faster than other species that rely on the same habitat, she said.

The loss of habitat is primarily caused by encroachment of trees and shrubs. The prairie chicken avoids tall plants and structures that could provide perches for raptors that prey on the grouse. Practices like fire suppression and cattle grazing have contributed to that habitat loss, as have changing weather patterns and climate change.

There are some tools that can be used to combat this habitat loss, Manes said.

“The first and most important is to create awareness among the public and land owners as well as policy makers and legislators,” she said.

Much of the prairie chicken habitat is on private lands, which makes agreements like the Kizer family’s conservation easement even more essential.

Manes said landowners value being able to make money off of their land and having the ability to pass it down to future generations.

The agreement creates a conservation easement, essentially preventing a portion of the Kizer ranch from being subdivided and turned into housing or developed in another fashion that could hurt the lesser prairie chicken habitat.

That doesn't mean the Kizers have to stop the farming and ending ranching practices that they have been engaging in for generations.

In fact, Kizer said the lesser prairie chicken benefits from the alfalfa and grains like sorghum, which his son plants. He said the prairie chickens are smart birds and can travel long distances to find their favorite foods.

Walker said there have been voluntary conservation efforts to try to protect the lesser prairie chicken, including by industry groups.

"They get an A for effort," he said.

However, Walker said effort doesn't necessarily mean that the desired outcome is achieved. Adding the lesser prairie chicken to the endangered species list is a last step to try to save it, he said.

Walker said that Common Ground Capital has conservation plans for oil and gas companies as well as renewable energy. That means oil and gas developers or renewable energy companies can buy credits to offset the impacts of their operations and those credits could provide people like the Kizers with money.

On public lands, the government can put in restrictions and implement habitat projects to help endangered and threatened species.

But the bird doesn't only rely on public lands and, when it comes to private lands, the government can't dictate that the landowner conserve habitats.

Paying the ranchers to conserve habitat on their lands can be a critical tool, Walker said.

In rural eastern New Mexico, Walker said "the private landowners are going to dictate whether or not this bird has a chance at recovery."