



Endangered species need a new approach to conservation

BY [WAYNE WALKER AND ADAM RIGGSBEE / LESSER PRAIRIE CHICKEN CONSERVATION LLC](#)

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The Endangered Species Act has been our national law for 50 years this year. Last month we recognized our endangered species including New Mexico's iconic lesser prairie chicken on Endangered Species Day. However, New Mexico nonprofit CEHMM rightly sounded the alarm bell for the lesser prairie chicken when it noted its population count of less than 230 birds remaining on 26 leks in the Eastern New Mexico shinnery oak region on lands enrolled in its conservation program.

The numbers reported by CEHMM are down 90% in the first quarter of this year alone.

At the same time, another national priority – building renewable energy – is being held back because of ESA and other regulations.

Faster recovery of species and faster approvals of new energy projects go together in the conservation banking program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Conservation banks ensure no net loss of habitat for each project by paying for the expedited recovery of wildlife including this rare grouse species.

Conservation banks exist today, and we operate several including our Lost Draw bank in New Mexico. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has already approved our Habitat Conservation Plans, bringing the benefits of impact mitigation to energy and to our endangered species.

This is a new approach. Conservation banks are private-sector investments that pay market rates to landowners for the best habitat results. The old approach spends public money on agencies and nonprofits who pay least cost to landowners for lesser benefits. That has achieved some nice results, but at a net loss over time to land conversion and traditional development activities.

New Mexico's state wildlife agency is exceptionally good at what it does and is comprised of amazing biologists. However, they are not authorized, nor trained really, to do what conservation bankers do. Our prairie chicken conservation bank pays private ranchers a market-based price for maintaining the bird's habitat strongholds. These are large areas of permanently protected habitat where the now almost extirpated population of lesser prairie chickens will grow.

American energy companies that fund the conservation banks get faster approval under the ESA because their projects are doing the least harm and the most good for the bird and meet the updated standard performance. The formula is greater than the sum of its parts when energy pays for conservation.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Southwest Regional Director Amy Lueders said restoring the lesser prairie chicken could help revive native prairie grasslands.

"The lesser prairie chicken's decline is a sign our native grasslands and prairies are in peril. These habitats support a diversity of wildlife and are valued for water quality, climate resilience, grazing, hunting and recreation," she said.

Meanwhile Sen. Martin Heinrich has said quickly building energy transmission and distribution is one of our most pressing challenges – in part because ESA and other approvals take so long. As the leader of a rare, bipartisan alliance in Congress to recover America's wildlife, he knows both challenges must be solved together.

If Congress wants permitting reform and America also needs to move away from the brink of ESA listings, we must crack the code for the lesser prairie chicken by securing conservation it needs.

Active and accountable management of these landscapes will save rare species like the lesser prairie chicken. The question is whether Americans want to do something different to save threatened species and their landscapes – or watch birds like the lesser prairie chicken and its habitat continue the march toward extinction.

We can build America's renewable energy industry and help this perilously threatened bird at the same time: speed of action is America's best way forward.
