

# Landowners Rally for Lesser Prairie-chickens

By Lew Carpenter

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It's no secret that successful, landscape-scale habitat conservation requires private landowner engagement. Wildlife – owned in trust by the state – are in many cases reliant on the habitat stewardship of private landowners to thrive.

During a recent speech in Wyoming, Robert Bonnie, Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation at the United States Department of Agriculture, emphasized the nature and relationship between farmers, ranchers and land owners to conservation. "We've long recognized the importance of working with people to conserve land in a voluntary and incentive-based manner," he said. "Over the last several decades, we have developed new tools to protect working lands from development and help manage them in ways that benefit wildlife, clean water and the climate – all while ensuring we continue to produce food, fiber and fuel."

For the lesser prairie-chicken (LPC), his words couldn't ring more true, and a coalition of landowners has come together to save these birds from a staggering population decline that puts them on the edge of endangered status. The Lesser prairie-chicken Landowner Alliance (LPCLA) is a group of a dozen land owners in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico working with federal agencies to find a path forward on LPC recovery.

Stacy Hoeme is one such landowner providing leadership to the group. His ranch in western Kansas north of Scott City has provided opportunities for neighboring Colorado Parks and

Wildlife to capture LPCs and relocate them in Colorado, creating a model for reintroduction that has been largely successful to date.

In 2011 Hoeme discovered he had lessers on his ranch (along with greater prairie-chicken, which is unusual). The birds that were discovered on his ranch, along with birds in 12 other area counties, put a pause on the first recommendations to list LPCs under the Endangered Species Act. Around 2017 a biologist out of Colorado came out looking to capture LPCs and relocate them to Colorado. At that time Stacy had about five leks that he knew of and they went to look at three of them. "One lek we had about 40 birds on that morning," Hoeme recalled. "I asked him how many he was looking to capture and he said 15 hens and 15 males. The target was to relocate them to the Comanche National Grasslands of Colorado. At that time the biologist said Colorado only had about 23 total birds. It was a three-year project capturing these birds and they did take 30 from the ranch. They ended up capturing about 45 to 50 birds during that three-year period, skipping the second year."

Following that, Hoeme and a few other landowners (including The Nature Conservancy) opened up their properties for folks to come out and see the birds. In the second year of viewing, people from 39 states and 11 countries visited.

Now, on the cusp of another ESA listing recommendation ("threatened" status in Kansas and Colorado and "endangered" in Texas and New Mexico), the LPCLA has gained steam and



Photo by Stacy Hoeme

influence on what happens next with landowners in the areas of the birds.

"The North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) sought to form the LPCLA because we knew there were conservation-minded landowners across the five-state range of lesser prairie-chickens, and we thought organizing them to focus their collective energy would be an effective way to influence government agencies to better help conserve prairies and chicken habitat," said NAGP Executive Director Ted Koch.

So far, the LPCLA has requested help from agencies with several program improvements, primarily including taking a more strategic and focused approach to conserving the most important habitats and paying enough to get the right landowners interested. They are also working to develop private markets for their conservation products that are important to all Americans, including healthy soil and vegetation, clean water and air, and carbon sequestration and wildlife habitat.

"We've only had a couple of meetings with USFWS and NRCS," said Hoeme. "Our last one was a really good one because we had an hour and a half and we were able to put a lot of things on the table, but it's still really political because they can't change some of the things we are asking for without going through congress and the Farm Bill."

The LPCLA would like to find a coordinated manner to address these issues rather than splitting up action between too many agencies. "In the past if you had Farm Service working with you on one thing and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) working on something else, it was separated," said Hoeme. "I'd like to see a habitat leasing program where we put things together. Even when we talk about carbon capture – if we could get that on top of everything and help us set up something, maybe we can operate through the NRCS or Farm Service office for all of it."

Helping other ranchers work better with the variety of agencies involved with habitat improvement and LPC conservation is a

major goal for the LPCLA. And Hoeme clearly notes that a lot of ranchers have never taken federal money; they don't want handouts, but if certain operations are required by the agencies, they want to get paid fairly for it. If they want cattle cut back or certain habitat work done, then yes, they want to be fairly paid for it.

Undersecretary Bonnie seems to understand this notion. "While tried-and-true tools like perpetual conservation easements and payments for specific restoration actions will remain important, we also need to develop new tools, like habitat leases, that give landowners some certainty over a decade or more, while allowing conservation priorities to shift geographically," he said in his Wyoming speech this past spring. "We want to help develop this new tool, habitat leasing. To meet partners' desire for long-term management that they can plan their businesses around, we will offer a habitat leasing opportunity built on our Grasslands Conservation Reserve Program. This working-lands version of the popular CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) program provides an annual payment to landowners in exchange for maintaining suitable wildlife habitat and preventing conversion to non-compatible uses for a term of 10 to 15 years. This is a working lands program, so ranchers can keep sustainably grazing those lands." 🐔



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