

# No more playing chicken

**BY WAYNE WALKER | LPC CONSERVATION | Jan 16, 2023**



The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and its southwestern regional office based in Albuquerque have listed the lesser prairie chicken (LPC) in New Mexico as “endangered” – and that Endangered Species Act regulation goes into effect on Jan. 24, in just a week.

The ESA is now 50 years old and the law of the land. Oil and gas producers, such renewable energy companies as wind and solar, and transmission companies who bring power to our cities must comply and reduce their impacts on the LPC or face massive fines and potential work stoppages.

There are only about 500 LPCs remaining in New Mexico, down from 1,500 just a year ago, according to species population counts, and dropping tragically from more than 20,000 birds in the mid-1980s. It's a predictable outcome of overdevelopment and energy extraction without concomitant natural prairie or desert rangeland easements and set-asides. Landowners deserve a market-based rate to protect and restore the areas the LPC and other grassland species need to thrive.

Such public and nonprofit programs as CHEMM, NRCS and conservation districts in New Mexico have tried to cobble together a checkerboard of land holdings to make space, which is so important to this ecosystem, for the Western bird. Folks from around the world come to eastern New Mexico preserves to see them in the springtime, driving an ecotourism market.

The LPC is now facing extinction in the southwestern states. We have 10,000 acres with the ability to expand in Pep, N.M., in an area of perfect LPC land – working with a family rancher who hopes to provide generational assurance for his sons, who are now taking over the cattle operations. This property is located near other conservation-minded private landowners and New Mexico state lands managed for LPC.

Let's combine these efforts in a strategic way that creates a stronghold 20 times larger, and build and restore 200,000 acres of open range. There is a way forward by collaborating with The Nature Conservancy, other ranchers in Roosevelt and Curry counties, and such state agencies as New Mexico Fish & Game to provide the contiguous landscape the bird needs.

Private conservation banks pay a fair market rate for land stewardship our ranchers have offered for generations. The “bank” – or holdings of the land in trust and in permanent easement – also provides a permanent endowment to create and maintain the habitat the bird needs, which benefits both the grassland ecosystem and the rancher ecosystem, including prescribed burns, removal of pesky mesquite and monitoring of the LPC and its habitat.

New Mexico is the last bastion of hope for the LPC.

Conservation banks like mine are in the business of making these solutions work. Our simple business proposition is to pay the ranchers who are producing the necessary ingredient for recovering the species for their stewardship and habitat. Under new federal law, people who join us get immunity from ESA penalties and make it possible to get out from under ESA entirely.

Truly, the state of New Mexico is the nexus of how we change conservation models and modernize our collective approach to peacefully co-existing with these marvels of nature.

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