

# The greater good is tied to lesser prairie chicken's fate

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The name alone is a testament to cruel irony.

Lesser prairie chicken.

Makes me want to squawk.

Actually, it ought to make all of us want to cry, because the lesser prairie chicken — a sage grouse that once filled the endless grasslands of Eastern New Mexico and a big

hunk of this nation's southern plains — is little more than a plains fire or hailstorm away from extinction, at least in this state.

The numbers are better elsewhere, but some estimates have the lesser prairie chicken's numbers in the low four-figures in New Mexico. It could be closer to 500. That's a funeral notice.

And while that sad possibility is well-known in the conservation community, it's largely been an eye roll, a shrug, to much of the public.

And for that, I blame, to some extent, the name.

If the species had been named Llano Estacado chicken hawk or Portales passerine — I'm kidding, but anything's greater than lesser — maybe the bird wouldn't be the most recent environmental canary in a coal mine.

But that's what it is.

“It's a bird that needs wide-open landscapes of grasslands, and in fact, it's in trouble,” says Wayne Walker, a businessman who has become one of the species' biggest proponents. “That means there's a lot of other things in trouble.”

The chicken's need for wide-open spaces is acute in Eastern New Mexico, West Texas and three other states (Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado). Granted, those places aren't exactly New Jersey, ridden by freeways, strip malls and Levittowns. But the plains landscape is fragile and dotted with oil wells, pipelines, transmission lines and human encroachment.

Add in climate change, and you've got the makings of big trouble.

“The prairie chicken suffers from pure lack of habitat,” says Walker. “We just need more. And they suffer from fragmentation of habitat.”

What does that mean? Walker steps up to the plate.

“You know, we have good habitat, but people build wind farms. They sell big ranches and ... chop ‘em up. And everybody’s got a house. Everybody’s got a road. Everybody’s got a power pole, oil and gas development,” he says. “I mean, we just need these large landscapes for this bird ... tens of thousands of acres connected without a bunch of vertical structures. That’s what this bird needs. And that’s what it’s not getting.”

Walker heads a firm called LPC Conservation, which approaches landowners and offers them market value for their land to be used in conservation while still allowing for the possibility of traditional use, like ranching. He has become a bullhorn for thinking about biodiversity and business in a different way.

It’s not simply enough to hope the bird’s listing as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will save it, he says.

He advocates a scenario in which government, landowners and private capital — plus an understanding there needs to be an increased price point in the value of the land — mesh to create larger and hopefully contiguous safe havens for the lesser prairie chicken to roam.

There are some strongholds in New Mexico where this is happening, including on land in southern Roosevelt County. But Walker dreams of cobbling together bigger swaths of contiguous land to protect the bird, perhaps as expansive as 200,000 acres.

Like a lot of dreams, this one isn’t easy to bring to fruition. Walker says he’s had a lot of doors slammed in his face by skeptical landowners over the years. He says he hopes

some will see they can actually make real money, perhaps even saving their land for their heirs, by thinking of conservation as a revenue stream.

Walker's firm has partnered with some ranches in the Pep/Milnesand metroplex to create a foothold for the chicken. But the more he talks, the more it's obvious that getting the idea to catch on will require a change in mindset. For years, we as a nation accepted there were winners and losers in the environment, and the losers were more expendable because they had funny names or were hard to see or didn't have enough supporters — or worst of all, didn't monetize.

The problem is, the losers' fate eventually becomes the winners' fate.

Walker says it's possible to have private interests and nature coexist. But he acknowledges that will require a complete change in mindset in how to look at saving a species like the chicken.

Industry, including oil and gas, may not see it that way.

“The hardest part is having people think about how they can both win,” he says, referring to private interests and Mother Nature.

For now, the lesser prairie chicken struggles to stay alive, if not aloft. I'm hoping the sky doesn't fall in the meantime.

Phill Casaus is editor of The New Mexican.