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Lesser Prairies Chickens perform their traditional mating dance, while mid-western states and counties join forces in conservation efforts to show the feds these plans will save the LPC and therefore, the feds won't need to list the bird as threatened, which could cause economic woes. Courtesy photo

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In 1995, due to declining numbers in the amount of land used as habitat for the Lesser Prairie Chicken, a Colorado-based group petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the species as threatened.

With the species itself in decline, numerous efforts to reverse that trend have been initiated, and in June 2012, conservation officials in Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado and Texas agreed to develop a range-wide conservation plan for the LPC.

USFW moved the species to a level 2 priority in 2010, and the LPC, along with more than 250 species, were named as a part of a 2011 lawsuit forcing the government agency to make a decision about whether to put those animals on the list of threatened species.

A decision on the LPC itself is expected to come in September, but officials with K-State Research and Extension said many have requested that deadline be prolonged.

The Extension hosted a webinar in several counties Tuesday evening, including Seward, and ag officials were brought up to speed on the progress of a plan to approach USFW about not having the LPC put on the threatened species list.

More than 600 farmers and ranchers are participating in the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative, and their efforts have resulted in almost 1 million acres of habitat being restored since 2010.

The initiative helps decrease LPC habitat loss, increase habitat connectivity and ensure the continue viability of western ranching.

Initiative leaders are now working to develop a plan to eliminate or reduce the risk of the species which they hope will affect the USFW decision.

That plan will be solely administered by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The plan provides a range-wide population goal for the LPC, identifies focus areas in each state where LPC conservation efforts will be focused, lists actions that will be taken to help increase its population, and provides a system for mitigating impacts to LPC habitat.

Immediate impacts from the listing would be additional rules, and some long-term results include declining land valuations and associated tax reductions.

For cooperatives, the range of impacts include higher land acquisition costs to meet mitigation requirements, a lengthening of the new facility permitting process and additional engineering, materia and construction costs resulting from regulatory uncertainty.

Additional effects from the listing include behind-the-scene impacts, which can include lower land valuations and eventual load losses from a demographic shift away from an agrarian culture.

Seward was also one of several Kansas counties to pass a resolution against listing the LPC as threatened, and county commissioners recently voted to enter into an agreement with Garden City's Stillwater Technical Solutions to build a coalition of counties, establish a conduit to proactively contribute to the Range Wide Conservation Plan and prepare a Land Use Coordination Plan to be adopted by the participating counties.

The third draft of the range-wide LPC conservation strategy has been posted for public review at www.wafwa.org/documents/AprilDraft_LEPCPlanSubmittedUSFWS04_02_2013.pdf.

Written comments on the LPC conservation plan will be accepted via e-mail to janc@gci.net or through the mail to Jan Caulfield Consulting, 114 S. Franklin St., Ste. 205, Juneau, AK 99801. WAFWA is taking comments on the range-wide plan until May. 15.

The final plan will be submitted to the USFW in May 2013 to be taken into consideration as they make their final listing decision.

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