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Thirty Kansas counties are now part of the coalition to keep the Lesser Prairie Chicken off the USFW's list of threatened species. Seward is in the middle of what is some of the "almost critical" habitat for the LPC. Listing the LPC as threatened would, as Seward County Commissioner Jim Rice said, "... basically, shut down industry in the county is the way I see it." Courtesy photo

Efforts to preserve lesser prairie chicken habitat could devastate Southwest Kansas economy

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is continuing its evaluation of whether to consider the Lesser Prairie Chicken a threatened species.

In April, Seward County commissioners joined a block of counties in the state that had signed or passed a resolution against the listing of the species by USFW.

Part of what county officials did at that time was agree to pay a portion of a monthly total of nearly \$18,000 for three months to be split between the counties involved.

As of Monday, Seward had paid most of its share, but when oppositions had been presented to officials in Washington D.C., the county's name was not on the list of those supporting the non-listing of the LPC.

Gove County Commissioner Mahlon Tuttle, one of the leaders of the group opposing the listing, was at Monday's Seward County Commission meeting to investigate and to inform local leaders about the project.

Tuttle said 30 Kansas counties are now part of the coalition to keep the LPC off the USFW's list of threatened species.

"We've got 30 counties now in this coalition," he said. "If we get to share the expense, no one county gets stuck with a great big bill. Since I got involved with doing this, we've added six counties."

Tuttle said some area counties, including neighboring Meade and Stevens, have joined the coalition, and he added Seward is in the middle of what he called some of the "almost critical" habitat for the LPC.

"We had you with us for a while," he said. "We'd kind of like to have the feedback as a coalition of what we did wrong, did we do something wrong, why did you decide not to stay with us for the phase 3, which was the delivery of this plan to Washington D.C. It also included the delivery of the plan to Oklahoma City and Albuquerque, N.M."

Tuttle said members of the coalition approached the office of U.S. Senator Pat Roberts, and a representative from that office questioned as to why Seward was not part of the coalition.

“We don’t have an answer for that,” Tuttle said. “I would just like to see you stay with us. I know budget problems, money’s tight.”

Seward County Commissioner Jim Rice gave a possible explanation as to why the county removed itself from the project.

“We kind of felt like this would be like throwing money into a dark hole because there didn’t seemed to be any end to it,” he said. “Could you give us an idea when there will be an end to it?”

Tuttle said the LPC was just one of six species that were identified in a court settlement in Denver that could affect Kansas.

“They need to be studied and see if they deserve listing as endangered species,” he said. “This isn’t the end. This is the beginning. I don’t know how much some of these species are going to affect Seward County versus Gove County. I hope to get this coalition together and we stick together. If it does affect you and not me, I still stay with it and help pay my share for a plan we hope will prevent this.”

Commissioner C.J. Wettstein asked Tuttle if he had an estimate as to what counties should be budgeting to be a part of the coalition. Tuttle admitted he did not have a specific number, but he did say that entities should do whatever they can to keep the bird off the list.

“When we first heard about this in Gove County, I told my other two commissioners I thought it would be worth it to our county if we had to spend \$100,00 to prevent this,” he said. “They decided we’d do what we had to do to prevent this from happening.”

Wettstein said the commission was approached earlier this year by James R. Carlson, an environmental engineer with Stillwater Technical Solutions, and Carlson told the board that if they gave \$2.100 in funding for the project, he would write up a proposal that could not possibly be turned down by the feds.

Wettstein said county commissioner Doug LaFreniere made the motion at the previous meeting to spend the \$2,100, and LaFreniere had told Wettstein that the money would likely be spent on having attorneys look into the proposal.

Monday, LaFreniere said he made the motion at that meeting because he did not want to get into a "never-ending fight on the prairie chicken or any other endangered species."

"We've got way too many other things we have to prioritize here," he said.

LaFreniere said he does not want to continue to throw money away on something he feels has been predetermined.

"We can throw a million dollars at it," he said. "We can throw two million dollars at it, and we can finance this altogether, but they're going to do what they're going to do. This is going to end up in court anyway, and it's going to stay there probably for a while."

LaFreniere said he made the motion under the pretense that the county was not going to have to budget for the item every year.

"Now, this is turning into that," he said. "At that time and at this time, we really should not take on any more financial obligations. We had the mill increase this year, and people are really hurting. I am not going to go along with any more additional expenses that are optional."

Wettstein agreed with LaFreniere, saying the process of delisting the LPC can be a time consuming and costly one.

“We just can’t have a bottomless bucket that we keep pouring money into,” he said.

Tuttle disagreed that the outcome of the issue had already been predetermined.

“They have to come to us, and we have an equal seat at the table, so I don’t agree that the decision’s already been made and we have nothing to say about it,” he said.

Tuttle said the coalition doesn’t just want money from Seward County, but it also wants input from local leaders.

Rice said before the commission goes any further with its part in the project and that input can be given to the coalition, the commission first needs to hear from the people it represents.

“We haven’t heard anything from farmers,” he said. “We haven’t heard anything from ranchers. We haven’t heard anything from oil companies. We haven’t heard anything from gas companies. We’re probably the only five in the county who have just a little bit of an idea about the real effects of this thing coming to be. It would basically shut down industry in the county is the way I see it.”

Rice said he believes getting input from the public would provide a solution for the county becoming part of the coalition.

“We’re sitting up here trying to make a decision for 20,000 people, and we don’t have any idea what they’re thinking,” he said.

More or less?

Thursday, 19 September 2013 13:17

County administrator April Warden said Wednesday the commission does plan to put the item on the agenda for its Oct. 7 meeting. She added the county had been billed \$1,687 of the \$2,100. The county has paid a total of \$2,389, which includes an initial investment of \$702 to have its comments included in the list with the rest of the Kansas counties to be sent to USFW.

Warden said the county would also need to pay an additional \$298 to be included in Phase 2 of the project. Commissioners will revisit the issue at the Oct. 7 meeting.

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