

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

At the Dec. 16, 2013, Seward County Commission meeting, commissioners Jim Rice and C.J. Wettstein provided the board with an update from the Kansas Natural Resources Coalition meetings and the importance of Seward County being a part of this coalition.

Rice and Wettstein anticipated at that time a cost of about \$2,500 to continue the county's participation.

Rice has been asked to serve as a KNRC board member, and during Tuesday's county commission meeting, he will have an update from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the potential listing of the lesser prairie chicken as an endangered species.



A letter from USFWS in the agenda packet indicates the species was proposed for a listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act on Dec. 11, 2012.

“The American Habitat Center proposes to develop a regional, multi-state stakeholder

conservation strategy that is intended to provide conservation benefits to the LPC,” the letter said.

The proposal consists of three components – a habitat conservation plan, a habitat exchange agreement and a habitat quantification tool. The proposal is also likely to consider a hybrid candidate conservation agreement with assurances or habitat conservation plan in order to provide regulatory certainty in the event the lesser prairie chicken is listed or remains a candidate for listing.

The stakeholder conservation strategy is intended to support the issuance of an incidental take permit by the service if the LPC is listed as threatened under the ESA.

That permit would provide “incidental take” coverage from activities listed within the stakeholder strategy including the future construction, operation and maintenance of oil and gas operations and agricultural uses.

The stakeholder strategy would apply to lands in eastern Colorado, southwestern Nebraska, western Kansas, western Oklahoma, eastern New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle.

The National Environmental Policy Act establishes a planning process that federal agencies are required to follow, and USFWS is preparing a draft environmental impact statement as part of that process.

“Through public scoping meetings and consultations with other agencies, the service intends to gather information necessary to prepare the draft EIS,” the letter said. “We also will use this process to obtain suggestions and information from agencies and the public on the scope of issues to be addressed in this document.”

The letter added county commissioners are invited to share any thoughts and concerns they may have about the proposed stakeholder strategy.

USFWS is hosting three public scoping meetings later this month. Scoping meetings will be organized in an open house format. Dates, times and locations for the meetings are:

- 6 to 8 p.m. Feb. 25 at Garden City Community College at 801 Campus Drive in Garden City;
- 6 to 8 p.m. Feb. 26 at the High Plains Technology Center at 3921 34th Street in Woodward, Okla.; and
- 6 to 8 p.m. Feb. 27 at the Cochran County Activity Center at 200 W. Taylor in Morton, Texas.

The commission's second February meeting was moved to Tuesday this week due to today's Presidents Day holiday. The meeting will begin at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday in the commission chambers in the Seward County Administration Building.