

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently made the decision to list the lesser prairie chicken as a threatened species, a choice which has left many people in various industries and county governments with grave concerns as to the effects of the listing.

Seward County Commissioner Jim Rice said this is a message that is simply not being heard.

“After the regulatory dust has settled, one needs to understand there is a certain thing called a ‘mitigation fee’ contained in the Five-State Plan that landholders, ranchers and communities should be concerned about,” he said in a letter to his fellow commissioners. “Anyone wishing to develop land in the area of the listing or make improvements such as pasture fencing, a building, construction of an electric line, wind tower, a road to a gas well or even a county road, will need a permit which has terms, conditions and requirements imposed from outside.”



Rice said under some circumstances, developers will have to pay a mitigation fee, not to property owners, but rather the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, an out-of-state organization that proposed to manage the permitting process for USFWS.

In the letter, Rice challenged the commission to find a farmer or rancher that would intentionally harm habitat or birds if it is at all possible to avoid.

“The federal government knows best, and the lesser prairie chicken must be ‘protected’ at all human costs because farmers and ranchers are not viewed as conservationists of their own land,” he said. “We are not to be trusted for the safety and care of bird habitat. We seem to be only good at destroying, according to some.”

Rice said if a bird is accidentally killed on a person’s property, protection will only be afforded to those enrolled in an approved conservation agreement.

“Think about that for a minute,” he said. “Who gave the federal government the right to blackmail us into supporting their plan and extort monies to grow WAFWA, which will only yoke citizens for the future?”

Rice added local government and property owners were left out of the preparation of the Five-State Plan and were only brought in during the “rubber-stamp public meetings” to show involvement in the process.

“Somehow, I get the feeling it is always about bugs and bunnies and not about those that farm and ranch and care for the land in order to help supply the world with food,” he said. “Perhaps, it is not about wildlife – or birds – at all. It is just too bad we cannot all set down and form an agreement beneficial to all.”

Rice asked that the efforts of the Kansas Natural Resource Coalition be continued, adding there is no other entity representing the county’s interest in the matter.

At tonight’s regular county commission meeting, the board will consider the signing of a proposed response from KNRC to the Bureau of Land Management and memorandum of understanding request concerning the recently approved Resource Management Plan revision.

“Additionally, you will find attached specific tracts in your county, which are included in the RMP under scoping for revision,” said a letter from KNRC to the commission. “BLM has requested a response by April 14. Should the response letter be approved, please provide KNRC an electronic or hard copy of the signed correspondence.”

The commission meeting is scheduled to begin at 5:30 p.m. today in the commission chambers in the Seward County Administration Building.