

Lesser-Prairie Chicken:

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Nearly all spoke against giving the lesser prairie chicken to Endangered Species Act protection, calling instead for either a delay on the decision or for the federal agency to allow local and state authorities to continue conservation efforts.

The 90-day public comment period ends March 11 and the deadline for federal agency's ruling is in September.

Charna Lefton, an assistant regional director for external affairs for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was among agency staff who listened to the public comments. She said agency officials will consider the comments from Monday's public hearing, along with three other public hearings in New Mexico, Oklahoma and Kansas, as it reviews the threatened species proposal.

The public hearing started with messages from three West

Texas congressmen, including a video message from Rep. Randy Neugebauer.

The Lubbock Republican spoke against listing the bird as a threatened species, calling for the federal government to allow ongoing state and local conservation to continue.

Neugebauer and a host of speakers from the agriculture and ranching industry said a threatened species listing, and potential limitations on land currently used for agriculture and energy, would have a detrimental financial impact on West Texas.

"In a region suffering from historic drought and a tough economy we can't afford that," Neugebauer said.

Caleb Pool, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Clarendon, read a statement for the congressman representing the Panhandle.

"I believe the current efforts of our states, our landowners and

our producers combined with past efforts show a sincere willingness to protect the lesser prairie-chicken habitat that precludes the need to list the lesser prairie-chicken as a threatened species," he said in the statement.

In another video message, U.S. Rep. Mike Conaway, R-Midland, called for the federal agency to use sound science during process and urged stakeholders to "be blunt" during the public hearing.

Linda Gillespie of Lubbock said she loves wildlife but doesn't trust a federal agency to manage it.

"Please let Texas handle it," she said. Lubbockite Holle Humphries was the lone proponent of the listing during the public comment period, noting the success of such federal conservation efforts as the Muleshoe National Wildlife Reserve, which protects sandhill cranes.

She said such conservation promotes area tourism and protects area wildlife.

"I support listing the lesser prairie-chicken as threatened if, for no other reason, than it has no voice other than ours," she said.

Another hearing was held Tuesday evening in Roswell, N.M.

The Service on Nov. 30 announced the start of a 90-day public hearing period initiating a process to consider whether the species should be recognized as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

The lesser prairie-chicken is a species of prairie grouse commonly recognized for its feathered feet and stout build. Plumage of the lesser prairie-chicken is characterized by a cryptic pattern of alternating brown and buff-colored barring. Males display brilliant yellow-orange eye combs and reddish-purple air sacs during courtship displays.

Once found in abundance across much of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, the lesser prairie-chicken's historical range of native grasslands and prairies has been reduced by an estimated 84 percent, according to the agency.

The state of Colorado has listed the species as threatened. The service first identified the lesser prairie-chicken as a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection in 1998.

State conservation agencies in Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico, in partnership with federal agencies — including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Land Management and partners such as the Sutton Center — are working on a range-wide, voluntary conservation planning effort that will play a significant role in conserving lesser-prairie chicken habitat.

Recent Study Findings
Through a multi-state collaborative effort, the first statistically-valid, range-wide population estimate for the lesser prairie chicken is an estimated 37,170 birds, according to a report released by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (WAFWA) Grassland Initiative and the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group. "After the worst single year drought in recorded history, we still have an estimated 37,000 birds on the ground range-wide, and that tells us that opportunities to recover

this species are better than what many people expected," said Sean Kyle, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department wildlife diversity biologist in Lubbock.

Aerial surveys this spring detected several previously unknown breeding areas, known as leks, despite severe drought conditions across the region last year. They also discovered leks in Kansas beyond what was thought to be the northern limit of the historic range of the species.

Lesser prairie chicken numbers have been largely increasing in Kansas for the last 15 years, while populations have declined in parts of the southern portion of the range, including Texas. Biologists believe this expansion may represent a northward shift in the population of the species caused by climatic conditions associated with changing precipitation patterns.

"Historically, we saw habitat conditions like we are observing now in the 1930s, and we thought the species went extinct," said Bill Van Pelt, grassland coordinator for WAFWA's Grassland Initiative.

"However, with habitat conservation programs being implemented through various Farm Bill programs and Candidate Conservation Agreements under the Endangered Species Act, we are seeing lesser prairie chickens maintaining themselves and even expanding into new areas in some parts of their range," said Van Pelt. "This definitely boosts our confidence in coming up with a plan to maintain this species."

The survey results is anticipated to be the baseline for a range-wide lesser prairie chicken management

plan currently being developed by the five state wildlife agencies in collaboration with the WAFWA Grassland Initiative.

This plan is expected to be completed by March 2013, and could influence the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) decision on whether or not to designate the lesser prairie chicken as a federally threatened or endangered species. The lesser prairie chicken has been considered a candidate under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1998, and the Service expects to release a proposed rule on the status of the bird under the ESA in November.

To help restore habitat for the bird, state and federal experts developed a tool called Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) to work with private landowners and managers in the geographic range of the lesser prairie-chicken. This voluntary program was designed to help reverse declining bird numbers by promoting habitat conservation and restoration through practices such as prescribed grazing, upland wildlife habitat management, brush management, prescribed burning, range planting and restoration and management of rare or declining habitats. The program also provides assurances to landowners that, beyond what is detailed in the CCAA agreement, they will not be required to meet any new regulations if the bird is listed under the Endangered Species Act. To date, close to 315,000 acres of Texas ranch land have enrolled in CCAs.

Courthouse:

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Gaines County Commissioners, in their Jan. 28 regular meeting, approved of a motion to seek "request for proposals" for an exterior repair/cleaning project for the Gaines County Courthouse.

"This is something I feel we need to seriously take a look at and consider, especially following the recent work we had done inside the Courthouse," said Lance Celderer,

Gaines County Judge in the Jan. 28 meeting. Celderer was absent from Monday's meeting, which was overseen by Gaines Co. Pct 1 Commissioner, and County Judge Pro-tem, Danny Yocom.

Celderer stated in the late-February meeting the Gaines County Courthouse facility, located at 101 S. Main St., has been experiencing some leaking issues with the facility's exterior, primarily in areas where mortar in joints have deteriorated over time.

"We spent a lot of money to fix up what we had on the inside, and we don't want to run into an issue where that work could be damaged because of exterior issues," said Celderer.

Dollahan, also in the late-January meeting, told Gaines County Commissioners he expected bids to be in the "six-digit figure" range for the project.

In late 2011, Gaines County saw the completion of a 13-month, \$6.98 million infrastructure renovation project at the three-floor courthouse facility, which is home to some 19 county and state offices and roughly 60 Gaines County employees.

The project saw improvements to the facility's heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, interior plumbing, electrical distribution and lighting systems. The installation of energy management and control systems, as well as new fire sprinklers and alarms were installed in the facility.

Other facility upgrades included the installation of new flooring in portions of the facility, and custom built cabinets, to name a few.

The Gaines County Courthouse also saw the installation of energy efficient windows and doors to the facility — at a cost slightly over \$1 million — as part of the project, which was conducted by NORESCO, a Massachusetts-based energy savings company which specializes in energy savings projects with governmental entities.

Charges:

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that seemed inconsistent with typical accident fires. "We noticed that the fire seemed to be suspicious," said Brownfield Fire Chief Dennis Rowe.

After further investigation from BFD and Sgt. John Kondratik of the Texas State Fire Marshall's Office, Brownfield police obtained a warrant to search the property. Detectives agreed the fire appeared to have been caused intentionally, then questioned Reimer, the homeowner. The witness eventually confessed to starting the blaze, but did not provide officers with a motive.

Police formed a felony warrant for Reimer's arrest, which he was served with at 11:58 a.m. Tuesday at the police station. He was then taken to the Terry County Jail, where he remains as of press time. Bond was set at \$50,000, but he is not eligible for release due to a hold for Immigration and Customs Enforcement as a suspected illegal immigrant.

Damage from the fire to his home was described as a total loss, estimated at more than \$150,000.

Reimer, who also has a pending charge for insurance fraud, could face between five and 99 years or life in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000 if convicted.

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