

All puffed up and nowhere to go

BY THERESA DAVIS / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER



A lesser prairie chicken perches on a branch in eastern New Mexico on rancher Mack Kizer's property just southeast of Portales. The bird's habitat is threatened by drought, overgrazing and energy development. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

Copyright © 2021 Albuquerque Journal

PORTALES – Lesser prairie chickens have a tough life.

Energy development and severe drought have left the colorful grouse with few pockets of prairie in New Mexico.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must decide by May 26 whether the bird should again be added to the endangered species list.

A federal listing could mandate species protection practices from ranchers, farmers and energy companies in the bird's five-state range.



Grouse biologist Tish McDaniel picks up markers on the open prairie east of Portales after providing conservationists and media an opportunity to see lesser prairie chickens gather in the spring to find a mate. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

Tish McDaniel, a grouse biologist, said the “ebb and flow” species depends on a habitat of ample grass and shrubs in the shinnery oak ecosystem.

“The health of the prairie chicken is kind of the health of the prairie,” she said. “If the prairie chicken’s not doing well, the prairie’s not doing well. And there’s not much out here right now.”

The lifelong Portales resident helped establish the 28,000-acre Milnesand Preserve for the birds as part of her career with the Nature Conservancy.

“All of our grassland bird species are important, and they’re in trouble,” McDaniel said. “I’ve been watching prairie chickens all my life. It would be a shame if people didn’t get to see that any more.”

McDaniel surveys local land for prairie chicken population counts, so she knows the best places to see the birds put on a show at dawn on cool spring mornings.

Male prairie chickens gather on leks, or mating grounds, to attract female birds.

The birds strut across the grassland as the sun rises. The little grouse fan their feathers and inflate air sacs to make a “booming” sound.

An October 2020 report released by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies estimates a population of about 5,100 of the birds in eastern New Mexico and west Texas.

That statistic is up about 300 birds since the 2018 survey, but still well below what biologists say are sustainable numbers.

Oil and gas, wind, and solar energy development can push prairie chickens away from their best habitat.

The birds avoid tall structures such as wind turbines or oil rigs because predatory raptors may perch there.



Rancher Mack Kizer walks recently through his land near Portales after watching lesser prairie chickens gather on the mating grounds at dawn. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

Portales-area rancher Mack Kizer remembers seeing flocks of 1,000 prairie chickens. Now, the birds are sparse.

“Right now, rain is our biggest obstacle to keeping the moisture during the hatching seasons so they can hatch up and raise a crop,” Kizer said. “This will be going on three years of a major drought like we’ve never seen before. We only got 3.5 inches down here last year.”

In early 2020, more than 2,000 acres of Kizer’s Lost Draw Ranch became a permanent conservation easement to protect the lesser prairie chicken.

Xcel Energy helped fund the easement to offset the massive nearby Sagamore Wind Project, a 100,000-acre, 240-turbine wind farm.

Xcel also relocated some planned turbines that would have been on prime habitat.

“The birds are special here,” Kizer said. “It’s good to use my land for them.”

Fish and Wildlife in 2014 listed the lesser prairie chicken as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The bird’s habitat spans parts of New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado and Kansas.

“Lesser prairie chicken populations need large tracts of relatively intact native grasslands and prairies to survive,” the 2014 listing decision states. “Significant threats to the LPC include habitat loss, modification, degradation and fragmentation within its range.”

A federal judge soon overturned the decision after a lawsuit from the Permian Basin Petroleum Association and four southeast New Mexico counties.

Judge Robert Junell of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas said Fish and Wildlife had failed to consider current conservation programs when listing the bird.

In 2016, an environmental coalition petitioned for a relisting.



A prairie chicken takes flight from a branch on a mating ground southeast of Portales. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must decide by May 26 whether the bird warrants federal protection. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

The U.S. Interior Department agreed that Fish and Wildlife would issue a decision by May 26, 2021, as to whether the lesser prairie chicken warrants federal protection.

Wayne Walker, founder of Common Ground Capital, works with landowners and industry to fund mitigation projects on private land.

The former wind energy developer said government programs should help ranchers see the birds as an opportunity, not an obstacle.

“Conservation has to pay private landowners,” Walker said. “We need to get mitigation dollars in the right place, at the right volume, at a reasonable cost, so we can actually start building some conservation back with this bird, in addition to offsetting industry impacts.”

Groups across five states under the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies patch together land purchases for habitat so that bird populations don't plummet further.

But some argue that the current program isn't meeting its objectives to protect the chicken and restore prairie habitat.

Wildlife agencies and private companies must face the "true cost of permanent conservation," said Adam Riggsbee, founder of RiverBank Conservation, which owns prairie chicken easements on 13,000 acres in New Mexico and Texas.

"Wind is a resource and intact prairie is a resource, and you have to allocate those resources wisely," Riggsbee said. "Our model is to go out, find the land, cut those deals, get the sites approved through the Fish and Wildlife Service, then put a price tag on it to make sure we charge the right value to our customers, which are oil and gas, wind, solar."

Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommend special livestock grazing plans to preserve chicken habitat.

Removing invasive plants and tall structures and using prescribed burns to reduce wildfires also help restore the land.

Theresa Davis is a Report for America corps member covering water and the environment for the Albuquerque Journal.