



The Farm Bill and Wildlife: Grassland Conversions Threaten the Lesser Prairie Chicken

The lesser prairie chicken, one of our nation's iconic grassland birds known for its unique breeding behavior, is also one of our most at-risk species. Now, increased crop insurance subsidies are threatening to convert even more of the grasslands that these birds need to survive.

Habitat Loss Threatens the Lesser Prairie Chicken

Lesser prairie chickens rely on a diversity of grassland habitats, including short- and mid-height grasses and forbs together with shrubs to provide cover. Loss of this diverse habitat is one of the biggest threats to the lesser prairie chicken's continued survival.ⁱ The lesser prairie chicken's current range covers portions of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas. This represents only 14% of the historic range.ⁱⁱ Human activities, such as cropland conversion, herbicide use and energy extraction have been primary factors in the loss of habitat.ⁱⁱⁱ Current numbers of lesser prairie chickens are estimated to have declined by more than 90% of their historic levels.^{iv}

Farm Bill Conservation Investments at Risk

Recognizing the importance of lesser prairie chickens, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service started the Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative in the five-state region where the birds are currently found. Using funding from the Farm Bill's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), NRCS invested over \$11 million to improving land management and increasing and enhancing lesser prairie chicken habitat on 458,000 acres in FY11.^{v,vi} Unfortunately, funding for EQIP has been cut by approximately 8 percent in the Senate's 2012 Farm Bill. WHIP has been consolidated with EQIP in the 2012 Senate and House Committee on Agriculture bills, but the Senate still has a 5 percent minimum set aside for wildlife. This minimum investment in wildlife is virtually eliminated in the House Committee's version. These cuts will likely impact NRCS's ability to invest in projects that benefit lesser prairie chickens and other wildlife species.

These cuts are not the only thing that put investments in lesser prairie chickens at risk.

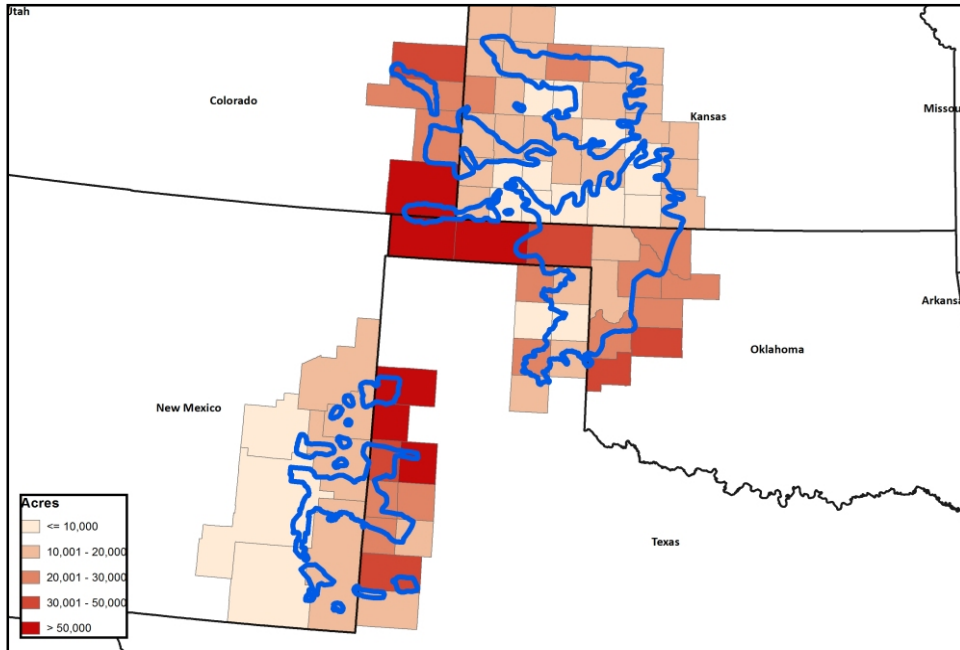


Photo by Gary Kramer. Courtesy natural Resources Conservation Service

A new report released by the Environmental Working Group and Defenders of Wildlife, "Plowed Under," documents how crop insurance subsidies are leading to increased grassland conversion and some of this conversion is happening in parts of the lesser prairie chicken's range. In fact, more than 1.5 million acres have been converted to cropland in counties where the lesser prairie chicken is found in just a three year period.^{vii} At this rate, even investments from EQIP won't be enough to stem the loss of lesser prairie chicken habitat.

"Ideal habitat [for lesser prairie chickens] would be a landscape dominated by grasslands."

Jim Pittman, Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism –July 2012



Lesser Prairie Chicken Habitat on Converted Acres

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http://static.ewg.org/pdf/plowed_under.pdf

The 2012 Farm Bill

Although the fate of the 2012 Farm Bill is currently up in the air, one thing is certain: increasing crop insurance subsidies without requiring basic environmental protections creates incentives for farmers to plow up more grassland and wetlands. The Senate passed a bi-partisan amendment to its Farm Bill that attaches basic environmental requirements to crop insurance subsidies. To protect the lesser prairie chicken and our nation's other iconic wildlife, conservation compliance must be included in any Farm Bill Congress passes in 2012.

ⁱ Natural Resources Conservation Service. 1999. Lesser Prairie Chicken: Fish and Wildlife Habitat Management Leaflet. Accessed at <http://www.wildlifehc.org/new/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Lesser-Prairie-chicken.pdf> on July 27, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Great Plains Landscape Conservation Cooperative. 2011. Lesser Prairie Chicken. Accessed at <http://www.greatplainslcc.org/programs/priorities-2011/lesser-prairie-chicken/> on July 27, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ NRCS. 1999.

^{iv} Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. N.D. Ecology and Management of the Lesser Prairie Chicken. Oklahoma State University. Accessed at <http://www.environment.ok.gov/documents/OKWindEnergy/EcologyMgmtLesserPrairieChicken.pdf> on August 2, 2012.

^v Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2012. Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative Report. Accessed at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1048247.pdf on July 30, 2012.

^{vi} Natural Resources Conservation Service. 2012. Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative. Accessed at <http://www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/2012/lpci.html> on July 31, 2012.

^{vii} Faber, S., Rundquist, S., Male, T. 2012. Plowed Under: How Crop Subsidies Contribute to Massive Habitat Losses. Environmental Working Group and Defenders of Wildlife. Accessed at http://static.ewg.org/pdf/plowed_under.pdf on August 6, 2012.