

LESSER PRAIRIE CHICKEN

Lesser prairie chickens in Colorado have a distribution restricted to the extreme southeast corner of the state. Historic records indicate that the species was never abundant in Colorado and is probably a peripheral species. Data indicates that the species was fairly common east of Campo in Baca County in the early 1900s, however the population declined dramatically following the dust bowl years in the 1930s. Small populations occur near Holly in Prowers County, on the Big Sandy Creek in Kiowa County, and a few birds known locally in Southwestern Cheyenne County.

The potential for management of lesser prairie chickens is relatively high as there appears to be suitable habitat within the known range that is currently unoccupied. Management within the current range may also be possible, especially by protection and enhancement of nesting and brood cover. A grazing management system on the Commanche National Grasslands to improve height density and forage production would greatly enhance efforts to improve lesser prairie chicken habitat. The effects of past Conservation Reserve Programs on lesser prairie chickens are unknown but the addition and enhancement of high quality warm-season grasses through CRP and other Farm Bill Programs will more than offset the loss of winter foraging areas in converted crop fields.

The lesser prairie chicken is the focus species for the High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk. This group is comprised of five states and includes over 20 different partners that are dedicated to the improvement of the grassland habitat within the lesser prairie chicken range. The Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group is another group that has keen interest in the restoration of lesser prairie chicken habitat in a five state area. This group has requested that the High/Rolling Plains be designated as a Conservation Priority Area (CPA) under the EQIP program. The lesser prairie chicken will also be identified as a species at risk under the most recent Memorandum of Agreement between the State of Colorado and the Department of Interior. This agreement is an attempt through cooperative efforts between governmental and non-governmental parties to provide a framework for the conservation of sensitive species within the State of Colorado. The locally driven intent of the 1996 Farm Bill Programs will complement the intentions of this agreement as well as the other partnerships that have focused on this species

The following guidelines may be used when writing specifications for wildlife practices for lesser prairie chickens in Colorado. These are guidelines only. They may need to be adapted to individual situations and site requirements

PLANNED GRAZING SYSTEMS

Follow NRCS Practice Standard 645, Wildlife Upland Habitat Management, and 528A, Prescribed Grazing. The objective of prescribed grazing when lesser prairie chickens are the target species is to increase height density and to improve composition of tall warm-season grasses that are occupied or have potential to be occupied by lesser prairie chickens. These tall, vigorous stands of warm-season grasses will increase survival, nesting, and brood rearing success of lesser prairie chickens. When these standards are applied for lesser prairie chickens, the following guidelines should be used.

Guidelines:

- Apply this practice guideline to native rangelands where lesser prairie chickens occur or have the potential to occur.
- Apply grazing management to the entire ranch.
- At least 20% of the land should be deferred from year-long grazing.
- Follow NRCS standard 528A, Prescribed Grazing for all other pastures.