

## Lesser Prairie Chicken proposed for Endangered Species Act protection

Written by Staff Reports  
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### **Prairie Grouse Endangered in Eastern New Mexico, West Texas; Threatened in Northeast Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado**

ALBUQUERQUE — In response to a 2016 petition and lawsuit from the Center for Biological Diversity and partners, on May 26 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to protect the lesser prairie chicken under the Endangered Species Act.

The Service determined that lesser prairie chickens in the disappearing shinnery oak prairies of eastern New Mexico and West Texas qualify as endangered. Populations of the bird in other grassland habitats in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Colorado qualify as threatened.

“We’re thrilled to see these magnificent dancing birds finally getting the strong Endangered Species Act protection they need to survive,” Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity said. “The lesser prairie chicken has to deal with drilling rigs, pipelines and the deadly heat waves that burning all that oil and gas brings about. These safeguards are coming not a moment too soon.”

The lesser prairie chicken’s decline has been fueled by the degradation and fragmentation of the vast southern Great Plains through conversion to cropland, grazing of cattle, erection of power lines and telephone poles, oil and gas development, as well as drought and high

temperatures linked to global warming.

Because lesser prairie chickens are exceedingly vulnerable to birds of prey, they instinctively stay far away from vertical structures — originally trees, but now also power lines, telephone poles and drilling rigs — that raptors naturally seek out as perches. As a result of these increasingly common manmade structures, the birds have a rapidly diminishing number of places to live.

To hide from terrestrial predators, lesser prairie chickens require relatively tall grass, which has also left them vulnerable to the effects of cattle grazing.

### Background

The Center for Biological Diversity's predecessor organization, the Biodiversity Legal Foundation, petitioned to list the lesser prairie chicken as a threatened species in 1995.

Over the ensuing quarter century, the Center repeatedly sued the Fish and Wildlife Service over the agency's delays in evaluating whether the bird should be protected.

In 2014 the Fish and Wildlife Service finally listed the lesser prairie chicken as threatened. But the following year, an oil and gas industry lawsuit led to a voluntary habitat conservation agreement that replaced the federal listing.

The insufficiency of that voluntary agreement induced the Center and its allies to petition in 2016 for endangered listing of the lesser prairie chicken. The subsequent lawsuit by the Center and allies and comments submitted in April led to the current proposal, which faced opposition from the oil and gas industry.

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