

WAFWA Secures First Conservation Easement for Lesser Prairie-Chicken

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) has finalized permanent conservation agreements with a private landowner to conserve 1,781 acres of high-quality lesser prairie-chicken habitat in south-central Kansas. This is the first permanent conservation easement in the mixed-grass prairie region secured as part of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-wide Plan.

The conserved acreage is all native rangeland currently being managed for livestock production, and this historical use will continue. The property is occupied by lesser prairie-chickens and is located within one of the highest priority conservation areas identified in the range-wide plan.

The transactions includes a conservation easement purchased by WAFWA and held by Pheasants Forever that legally restricts future development and activities that would be detrimental to the habitat for the bird. All other property rights associated with historical use of the land will be retained by the private landowner. WAFWA has also established an endowment that will provide the landowner with sufficient payments to implement a lesser prairie-chicken conservation plan in perpetuity. This transaction not only permanently protects key prairie habitat but also ensures that this property will remain a working cattle ranch.

“This conservation easement is another milestone in the successful implementation of the range-wide plan and will permanently secure important habitat that the birds need to thrive,” said Roger Wolfe, WAFWA’s Lesser Prairie-Chicken Program Manager. “We appreciate the collaboration with Pheasants Forever, our industry partners who are funding this effort, and the conservation-minded landowner who has made this possible.”

“It took a lot of work on the part of WAFWA, Pheasants Forever and ourselves to find a balance between the needs of the lesser prairie-chicken and maintaining historical use of the land,” said Tom Hammond, manager of the property. “The result is an innovative approach that acknowledges and rewards landowners for permanently conserving large tracts of habitat, while maintaining the integrity of the land for the long-term benefit of the landowner and the species. There is high quality habitat there now because we have managed the range properly for both grazing and wildlife. These agreements make sure that approach remains in place forever.”

The range-wide plan is a collaborative effort of WAFWA and the state wildlife agencies of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. It was developed to ensure conservation of the lesser prairie-chicken by providing a mechanism for voluntary cooperation by landowners and industry and improving coordination between state and federal conservation agencies. Funding for WAFWA’s conservation efforts comes from voluntary mitigation payments by industry partners that are enrolled in the plan. The plan allows agriculture producers and industry to continue operations while reducing impacts to the bird and its grassland habitat. Landowners interested in participating in one of the short-term, long-term or permanent conservation options available under the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Range-wide Plan should contact Roger Wolfe at roger.wolfe@wafwa.org