

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My name is Kent Fricke. I am the Small Game Coordinator for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks and work out of the Emporia Research and Survey Office. I coordinate research and survey efforts for upland game birds and turkeys in Kansas and I am our primary point of contact for lesser prairie-chickens.

The lesser prairie-chicken is a grouse species that occurs in five states—Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. It is a ground-nesting bird—slightly smaller than a pheasant—that is well-known for its elaborate mating dances in the spring. In Kansas, the species' range covers most of the western third of the state and lesser prairie-chickens require large tracts of intact grassland to maintain robust populations. They have a 'boom-and-bust' reproductive strategy, in that—when quality habitat is available—several years of poor reproductive success may be offset by one or two years of good productivity. Lesser prairie-chickens are highly influenced by vertical structures—especially during the nesting season—when they avoid trees, powerlines, communications towers, and other vertical features on the landscape. In addition to existing rangelands, lesser prairie-chickens are highly reliant on fields enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, especially during drought years.

Lesser prairie-chicken populations have declined as intact grasslands in the Southern Great Plains have been reduced in size and become more fragmented. The population low point occurred in 2013 following several years of severe drought in the Southern Great Plains. While populations are currently higher than ten years ago, the current drought is again driving population declines. Approximately 80% of the lesser prairie-chicken population is in Kansas.

The lesser prairie-chicken has a long history of conservation concern and the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was first petitioned to list the species in 1995. It then held the status of "Warranted, but Precluded" from listing for over 16 years before it was listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2014. In 2015, the listing was vacated, but the Fish and Wildlife Service was again petitioned to list the species in 2016. In 2021, the Service proposed to list the lesser prairie-chicken as threatened in the northern portion of its range—which includes the Kansas populations—and endangered in the southern portion of its range in Texas and New Mexico. In November 2022, the Fish and Wildlife Service finalized this decision, with now an effective listing date of March 27, 2023.

The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks coordinates with other state wildlife agencies to implement standardized range-wide surveys of the lesser prairie-chicken population, as well as our own state-based ground surveys. We coordinate closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on all aspects of lesser prairie-chicken policy and work with our conservation partners and landowners to coordinate and inform policy decisions. In coordination and partnership with our conservation partners, we implement and coordinate conservation actions in the lesser prairie-chicken range. We work closely with the Farm Services Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Partners Program, non-governmental organizations, and our own Habitat First Program to ensure conservation programs are targeted to areas most likely to improve lesser prairie-chicken habitats.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this information to the committee.