



News Release

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New Conservation Effort Benefits Rare Species in Southeastern New Mexico

First Ever Conservation Agreements Created Specifically for Lease Holders on Federal Lands

Albuquerque – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Land Management have launched an innovative conservation program that encourages landowners, energy companies and ranchers to join the agencies in protecting and restoring habitat for the lesser prairie chicken and sand dune lizard in southeast New Mexico. An energy company and a rancher pledged their commitment to the program at a ceremony today.

The agencies and the Center of Excellence for Hazardous Materials Management will administer voluntary ‘Candidate Conservation Agreements’ (CCAs) for oil and gas lease holders on federal lands and ‘Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances’ (CCAAs) for state and private landowners to benefit the species.

Lynn Scarlett, Deputy Secretary of the Department of the Interior, helped launch the effort. “Today, we’re showcasing the future of conservation – a future that involves agencies, landowners, industry, conservation groups and communities working together to recover rare species of wildlife.”

“What’s new today is that we’re adding the use of Candidate Conservation Agreements for grazing permittees and energy lease holders on Federal lands, which can be used along with the agreements the Fish and Wildlife Service has been using with owners of private lands,” Scarlett added. “The agreements we’ve signed today will serve as a model for other states that have public lands.”

Partners can now proactively take actions to reduce or eliminate threats to the lesser prairie-chicken and sand dune lizard on all land ownership types. In return, private landowners will receive assurances that their operations will continue regardless of whether the species ever come under the protection of the Endangered Species Act, and operators on federal lands will receive a greater degree of certainty that their operations will not change.

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A Candidate Conservation Agreement was signed today at the Rio Grande Nature Center by the agencies and Marbob Energy Corporation of Artesia. Marbob will minimize surface disturbance within a lease in Lea County by reducing and relocating the number of wells it plans to drill, and by constructing infrastructure in locations that avoid habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

In addition, Chris Brininstool, a rancher in Lea County signed a CCAA covering the operation of two sections (1,280 acres) of private lands within her ranch. Brininstool will undertake a variety of conservation activities: marking fences to prevent mortality in pre-dawn flights to 'booming' grounds; construct escape ramps in livestock tanks for birds and other wildlife to exit safely; and maintain habitat (e.g., restore grasslands) so that these lands can be used for future reintroductions of lesser prairie-chickens.

The agreements signed today build on the BLM's Special Status Species Resource Management Plan Amendment, completed in April 2008 to protect the species and restore their habitat. The Plan established requirements that are applied to all future federal activities, regardless of whether a grazing permittee or oil and gas leasee participates in the CCA program. The strength of the CCA comes from implementation of additional measures that are above and beyond the requirements in the RMP.

"These agreements are historic because landowners and industry can proactively participate in conserving rare species," said Linda Rundell, New Mexico State Director for the BLM. "We have a new tool in the conservation toolbox and I commend Marbob, and Ms. Brininstool for their forward-looking approach to conservation."

The Service was petitioned in 1995 to place the lesser prairie-chicken on the federal list of threatened and endangered species and received a similar petition in 2002 for the sand dune lizard. The Service considers both species as candidates for ESA protection and closely monitors their status and promotes their conservation.

"Our goal in this effort is to protect and recover the two species," said Benjamin N. Tuggle, Ph.D., Regional Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Southwest Region. "No agency or group can accomplish this alone; working together puts us in a stronger position to ensure conservation objectives are fulfilled and puts the two species in a stronger position to overcome threats to their habitat."

The Service and BLM can add or make necessary modifications to existing conservation measures found in CCAs and CCAAs which will apply to future agreements. In addition, new conservation measures can be implemented if the Service or BLM find the measures to be necessary to facilitate the continued conservation of the chicken and/or lizard.

Copies of the CCA and the CCAA can be found at:
<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/NewMexico/>