

## United States Senate

August 4, 2015

Dan Ashe, Director  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Ashe:

Recently the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Association (WAFWA) completed an annual aerial survey to assess the population of the lesser prairie chicken, estimating 29,162 birds currently populate the habitat area. The 2015 estimate represents a significant increase in population from the 2013 and 2014 assessments of 19,643 and 23,363, respectively. In one year since the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service listed the lesser prairie chicken as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, the population has increased by 25 percent. Since 2013, the bird's population has increased by almost 50 percent.

Strong evidence exists indicating the dramatic rise in the lesser prairie chicken's population can primarily be accounted for by increased rainfall in the habitat area. From 2012 to 2013 – the height of the historic, multi-year drought that impacted the area – the bird's population predictably decreased. According to the U.S. Drought monitor, every county in Kansas with habitat area was experiencing a D3-Extreme Drought or D4-Exceptional Drought in 2013 at the time of the WAFWA annual aerial population survey. As rainfall returned to levels closer to historic norms in 2014 and this past spring, the population, again predictably, also rebounded.

Area-wide conservation efforts developed and supported by stakeholders may also be positively impacting the lesser prairie chicken population. These locally driven plans were put in place with landowner input to help conserve the bird in a sensible, voluntary manner. Unfortunately, the plans were not given the opportunity to prove effectiveness because the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service stepped in to list the bird as a threatened species. The decision to list the bird forced burdensome regulations on farmers, ranchers, energy developers and other industries in the habitat area and discouraged other local conservation efforts.

The surge in the lesser prairie chicken population raises several questions the agency should address:

- How does the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service intend to utilize the 2015 WAFWA population estimates showing a significant increase in the lesser prairie chicken population?

- In light of the new population estimates, does the agency intend to reconsider whether the lesser prairie chicken should be listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act?
- Does the agency agree that rainfall levels in the habitat area impact the lesser prairie chicken population? If so, to what degree does the agency believe the bird's population is dependent on rainfall as compared to other factors?

The regulations imposed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service are causing harm to rural communities across Kansas and other states with habitat area, so it is critical the agency work in a timely manner. Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,



Jerry Moran

JM:jg