



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Post Office Box 1306
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103

In Reply Refer To:
FWS/R2/ES-ARD/063081

MAY 31 2016

The Honorable Jerry Moran
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Moran:

Director Ashe has asked me to respond to your letter dated May 11, 2016. Thank you for contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) regarding the recent Department of Justice (DOJ) action and Service plans related to the lesser prairie-chicken. The Service appreciates the attention and commitment from all stakeholders who are working to conserve the lesser prairie-chicken and its habitat.

We are pleased that the population estimate from the last two aerial surveys conducted by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) indicated an increase in the total number of lesser prairie-chickens. However, total population levels are still well below historical numbers. Additionally, the effects of habitat loss and fragmentation continue to negatively affect the species. The Service remains concerned about habitat loss and fragmentation in the range of the lesser prairie-chicken. As discussed in our August 26, 2015, letter, it is not uncommon for a species like the lesser prairie-chicken to experience rapid population fluctuations (both increases and decreases), which are strongly linked to annual precipitation. It is because of these rapid population fluctuations we do not rely on a given year when we assess status of the lesser prairie-chicken population. Instead, we analyze the current and future threats to the species.

The decision to withdraw the appeal of the district court decision does not represent a biological determination that the lesser prairie-chicken no longer requires protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Service is reassessing the overall status of the species and conservation efforts, based on the court's ruling and the best available scientific data. Based on our assessment we will determine what future actions to take relative to the lesser prairie-chicken and determine if the species should be a candidate for listing.

The Service is continuing to work with all stakeholders on conservation efforts benefiting the lesser prairie-chicken. Our ultimate goal continues to be long-term conservation of the species.

Thank you again for your interest in this matter. If you have any additional questions please contact me at 505-248-6282.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben D. Fugle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and a long, sweeping underline.

Regional Director

The Honorable Jerry Moran

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cc: 3238-MIB-FWS/CCU
ARD-EA