



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Washington, D.C. 20240

FEB 27 2013



The Honorable James Inhofe
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Inhofe:

Thank you for your letter of February 20, 2013, also signed by several of your colleagues, regarding the proposed listing of the lesser prairie-chicken under the Endangered Species Act.

As you referenced in your letter, the five state fish and wildlife agencies, working together under the auspices of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA), are developing a range-wide conservation plan for the lesser prairie-chicken. Because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) expects that range-wide plan to inform our listing determination, we will re-open the comment period upon receipt so that the public can comment on the plan and any other information relevant to the proposed listing rule.

The Service committed through a court-approved settlement agreement to complete a final listing determination for the lesser prairie-chicken by September 30, 2013, unless we find that substantial disagreement regarding the sufficiency or accuracy of the available data relevant to the determination requires additional time. While we have no basis to make that finding at the present time, we will revisit the question of whether an extension is needed after the close of the final comment period later this spring.

The Service appreciates how private landowners, companies, and public management agencies have been working to manage habitat and conserve the species, and we recognize that we cannot restore, protect, and reconnect habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken without the voluntary assistance of these entities. It is the Service's intent to work with our partners and private landowners to keep the lesser prairie-chicken on the landscape, reverse its decline, and help the species coexist with those who make their living from the land. To this end, we have provided an expedited review of the draft Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurance for oil and gas, and look forward to continuing to work with WAFWA on that aspect of the conservation plan.

Thank you again for your interest in conservation of the lesser prairie-chicken. If you have any additional questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me or have your staff contact Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, our Southwestern Regional Director, at 505-248-6282.

Sincerely,


DIRECTOR