

SUMMARY MINUTES
PECOS DISTRICT RESOURCE ADVISORY COUNCIL (RAC)
LESSER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN HABITAT PRESERVATION AREA OF CRITICAL
ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN (LPC ACEC) –LIVESTOCK GRAZING
SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING

Field Manager Chuck Schmidt opened the meeting and welcomed all. Ms. Tish McDaniel and Mr. George Farmer, RAC members, were introduced as those chairing this sub-committee to He informed the group that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the 58,000-acre Area of Critical Concern (ACEC) designated as habitat for the Lesser prairie chicken in 2008 and what to do with this area and enlist volunteers to serve on this Committee.

Mr. Schmidt explained that since this designation BLM has acquired two major areas, the White Lakes Ranch and the Sand Ranch. The largest area is now federally managed land. He explained that since the government can only pay for land at appraisal value that Conservation Fund dollars were used to purchase the private permitted land and the government then reimbursed the Fund at appraisal value.

Currently this land is not being grazed and here will be no Taylor Grazing Act permits available for the area. BLM is attempting to write a management activity plan for the area to enhance habitat for the prairie chicken. Their numbers have been stable until this last year but the recent drought has had a large effect on the species.

Adam Ortega, BLM Range Conservationist, gave a power point presentation of the area. Areas where fences have been located and will be removed to allow Chicken movement were shown. Also, water will be brought in where necessary. The goal is to protect the biological qualities of the ACEC, emphasizing preservation of the area for the LPC. Vegetation will be managed to meet the goals of the ACEC and grazing will be managed and monitored to meet the Standards for Public Land Health. The BLM will consider management of grazing if, and when, necessary.

Current BLM Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) goals will be managed for recreation, roads, and trails for off-highway vehicles.

The expectations of the committee's research into the "Why, What, When and Who" of grazing for management of the land, and descriptions of same, were listed as well as the BLM contacts for further information.

Randy Howard, BLM Wildlife Biologist, explained that the area is one of the stronghold areas in the Five-State Plan for the chicken. Statistics of mortality of the Chicken were given and numbers of birds captured for counting purposes. Of the 10 birds collared in 2014, only six (6) nests were initiated. Of these six, four (4) successfully produced young. The ACEC area had the most survival rate in several studies.

Glen Garnand, BLM Planning and Environmental Coordinator, explained that RMPAs are usually goal specific, so implementation/activity plans show specifics for managing these goals. These includes all resources in the areas. Outcomes for the plans are shown and include monitoring tools. He stated that this committee was formed to help guide planning for vegetation management in this area.

Chuck Schmidt further discussed the expected goals of the Committee and their ability to bring in others to form a plan for how to go forward and possibly provide a product for consideration by the spring of 2015.

Committee and Resource Advisory Council (RAC) member Tish McDaniel reiterated that this is a group to provide input into all aspects of ranching/grazing in this area to promote the viability of the Chicken and not a forum for discussion of the Fish and Wildlife recent designation of the species.

George Farmer, also a Committee and RAC member explained that he is in charge of this chicken area for the Department of Game and Fish.

Discussion of using only grazing cattle was heard and the complexity of using grown rather than yearling cattle. It was asked if there might be a permanent staff member located on the area and Mr. Schmidt explained ways the BLM has been working on the area and the fact that funding is an issue relative to permanent staffing in the area. He explained that legislation is necessary to be able to use any funding generated by grazing the area.

The possibility of having to actually pay people to graze the area, that timing is important for the health of the land, the importance of rotation of pastures, were all discussed.

Water was discussed, including piping, pumping, drinkers, etc.. The water is for consumption of wildlife.

Chuck relayed that occurrences prior to BLM involvement included other native species. Fire and drought also played a part. We now must manage to improve the area for the Chicken and that quality habitat benefits all species. If the area is improved for the Chicken, it should benefit all.

Water wells and routes and drinkers were shown and discussed. A field trip to the area by the Committee was suggested to better determine an amount of cattle to be supported.

It was suggested that trading management of the land for ability to graze could be an option. The grazing period was asked about and the ability to change fencing of areas at different times of the year.

Different concerns of what would happen year to year regarding stocking numbers were raised and discussed.

It was reiterated that whatever management decisions are made it will not include a way for a rancher to make a profitable working arrangement.

There was mention of a concern by private land owners that whatever management occurs in this area might be imposed on private lands.

Mr. Schmidt explained that the ACEC is different from the other lands under the RMPA; it is a special area that will be managed for its specific goals.

It was stated that water is going to be a limiting factor.

Education is a necessary factor to be able to accomplish this plan.

Mr. Schmidt explained that the Committee can meet, tour and discuss with other RAC members at any time, but when a formal recommendation is made to the Council as a whole, a notice must be put in the Federal Register. This can be incorporated as an agenda item listed in the RAC meeting notice published in the Federal Register.

Public Comment Period: Preston Stone stated that if domestic livestock is to be used as a tool to manage habitat, all must open their minds to the fact that this acreage can be managed to enhance habitat this way, but if anyone is unwilling to agree, it cannot work.

The Committee then asked for volunteers to be included on the Committee. Those volunteering are listed below:

NMDA Representative (name to be provided)
Brett Riley,
Whit Storey
Charles Dickson
Wendell Bostwick, NMAC
Kyle Dillard
Jim Weaver
Willard Heck,
Grant Beauprez
Tish McDaniel, George Farmer (RAC members).

It was asked if a non-profit agency could be established if desired and the answer was that all ideas may be looked at.

A date for a tour of the area was determined.

October 2, 2014

All meet at **Caprock Rest Area at 10:00 am**

Bring own lunch.