

Ranch Conversations: A Blueprint for Conserving Species and Rural Lifestyles



A Publication of the Western Governors' Association,
the High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk, and
the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

RICK PERRY
GOVERNOR

Dear Friend:

Ninety percent of the High Plains, which includes West Texas, is privately owned land. So it stands to reason, if we want to conserve rare species, we must involve willing landowners in conservation planning and provide incentives to support their efforts to recover species. The Western Governors' Association has tested the value of this approach through the High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk, which brings together state and federal agencies, landowners and other interested parties to develop cooperative initiatives that benefit both wildlife and agriculture.

Ranch Conversations: A Blueprint for Conserving Species and Rural Lifestyles, describes the efforts of five states – Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas – to directly involve landowners in conservation planning for the lesser prairie chicken. The turning point for this effort was a series of what were called "Ranch Conversations," during which landowners offered their advice and assistance to state and federal wildlife agencies, and the agencies offered incentives to help them achieve their mutual goals. To date, more than 84,000 acres are being managed to benefit this rare grouse, and another 200,000 acres have been approved for inclusion as incentive funding becomes available.

Those who participated in developing this community-based project believe successful conservation efforts begin by opening the lines of communication and asking questions. They wrote this report to share the valuable lessons they learned with other states, federal agencies, communities and private landowners struggling with similar conservation issues.

Your comments are welcome and contact information is provided should you wish further information on the Ranch Conversation process and the voluntary conservation agreements that resulted.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Perry".

Rick Perry
Governor

Ranch Conversations: A Blueprint for Conserving Species and Rural Lifestyles

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“Understanding the importance of landowner involvement was one thing. Winning their trust and cooperation was another matter. In the end, it required what some of those involved in the effort described as ‘a new way of doing business.’ (Government agencies) had to find a better way of communicating with landowners, and landowners had to be more directly involved in the conservation planning process.”

A New Way of Doing Business

The High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk brings together a wide variety of interests – governmental agencies, private landowners and nonprofit groups – to devise voluntary solutions that will not only reverse the decline of once abundant wildlife, but also benefit the people who live and work on the High Plains.



In 1996, the Partnership’s first pilot project was launched, focusing on the lesser prairie chicken, which makes its home in the sand sage, shinnery oak and other midgrass rangelands in parts of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Those states’ wildlife agencies had seen this rare grouse’s numbers fluctuate widely over five decades, then plummet in the early 1990s. To turn those numbers around, the agency directors agreed they needed to work together as a region and formed the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group (Working Group). Other state and federal agencies that oversee wildlife and agricultural issues were also brought on board.

The key, however, was not governmental agencies working amongst themselves. The Working Group knew it had to develop a cooperative working relationship with the ranchers and farmers, who owned more than 90 percent of the land that was the historic habitat of the lesser prairie chicken. As this report details, understanding the importance of landowner involvement was one thing. Winning their trust and cooperation was another matter. In the end, it required what some of those involved in the effort described as “a new way of doing business.” They had to find a better way to communicate with landowners, and landowners had to be more directly involved in the conservation planning process. There were many false starts and disappointments along the way, but “the lights turned on” when the Working Group decided it would take something akin to a neighbor-to-neighbor conversation.

The lines of communication with landowners opened wide during and after a series of 12 Ranch Conversations. The message was, “We’re here to ask questions, not to pass edicts.” In the two years since the first Ranch Conversation was held in Buffalo, Oklahoma, more than 84,000 acres of private land have been committed to grazing and vegetation management plans that will enhance or recover range conditions to benefit lesser prairie chickens. Another 200,000 acres of private land have been proposed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for enrollment in Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances.

In the future, other initiatives within the High Plains will be undertaken using the model developed by the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group. It is hoped that this document will assist many other conservation initiatives that require cooperation between the public and private sector. By no means was this initiative a textbook process. There were many internal and external obstacles that had to be overcome. However, one clear lesson learned is that improving communication with stakeholders, by whatever method that works, greatly improves the odds for achieving success.



In the Beginning: Overcoming Fears

In October 1995, the Biodiversity Legal Foundation petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the lesser prairie chicken as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Kevin Mote, endangered species biologist for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, worried that such a listing would be a major setback for the recovery of bird.

“We can’t point our finger at one thing and say, ‘fix this.’ What we do know is 93 percent of the historic range of this bird is in private ownership, and if we hope to ensure a stable population, our first objective should be to improve management of private lands,” Mote said shortly after the petition was filed.

An informal group of state and federal agencies and private landowners had already begun working on a plan to recover the bird, but he feared a listing would breakdown communications, saying a “listing of this bird will only complicate matters with private landowners.”

Shortly after the petition was filed, the group officially formed the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group to take steps that would reverse the bird’s decline and prevent the need for a federal listing. A core committee was formed and established five objectives:

1) identify threats to the lesser prairie chicken and develop/implement regional conservation actions that will enhance habitat and populations range-wide; 2) determine the status and monitor the trends of the populations and habitat; 3) develop and implement management guidelines for bird populations and habitat conservation; 4) provide information, education and technical assistance to landowners; and 5) increase the current knowledge regarding biology and management through research.

An Education, Information and Outreach Subcommittee was created to figure out how best to communicate with and engage landowners and other interested parties in the process. And the first obstacle they had to overcome was a general fear of dealing with a species that could be listed as threatened or endangered at any time. Hand wringing, indecision and overall avoidance initially hampered progress.

The first major outreach effort occurred in the spring of 1997 with a newsletter and survey entitled, “Lesser Prairie Chicken Update.” The outreach committee believed a newsletter would be a good primer for informing stakeholders about the status of the bird and the existence of the Work Group. After reading about the work that was underway, readers were asked to offer their ideas for conserving bird populations.

The response to the survey, to say the least, was “under-whelming.” Out of 31,000 surveys mailed or handed out in the five-state region, less than one percent were completed and returned. The response was very disheartening to the committee and actually stymied further outreach efforts for nearly a year, before a second option for involvement emerged.

Landowners had always been top on the list of stakeholders because their involvement was crucial to the recovery effort. The first newsletter had a much broader audience. The group agreed they had to first target private landowners, but the stakeholder list would be maintained for future use. And because each stakeholder is different, the method of communication would be tailored accordingly.

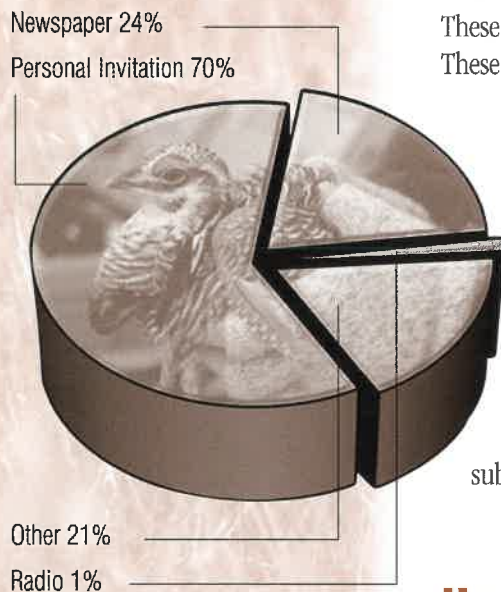
“We can’t point our finger at one thing and say, ‘fix this.’ What we do know is 93 percent of the historic range of this bird is in private ownership, and if we hope to ensure a stable population, our first objective should be to improve management of private lands.”

*Kevin Mote
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department*



At each Ranch Conversation, attendees were asked to fill out a survey. One question asked was how they heard about the meeting. Of those who responded, more than two-thirds had received an invitation. Many got their information from more than one source, and some only heard about it from someone they knew. While the invitation was critical, the subcommittee believes there is value in using as many outreach methods as possible.

How did you find out about the Ranch Conversations?



(229 responses; more than one box was checked on some forms)

The Lights Turn On

How to get landowners involved was the main objective and biggest dilemma facing the outreach subcommittee. Something as impersonal as a newsletter obviously was not the answer. So what would work?

In August 1998, nearly a year after the first newsletter was sent out, the group began discussing options.

“Public meetings generally are not a very successful way to initiate two-way communication channels between government agencies and private landowners,” said Erich Langer, outreach coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Tulsa, Okla. “We’ve got to come up with something else.”

Tom Lucas, a Resource Conservation and Development Council coordinator from Buffalo, Okla., said the meeting organizers needed to convey the message that they didn’t want to talk “at” landowners. Rather, they wanted to have a conversation. He suggested they have a “Ranch Conversation.” The term stuck, and the group began building a meeting format around that concept.

Getting word out about the Conversation was handled in several ways, but the most effective tool was a personal invitation. The invitation was tailored specifically for each meeting. It listed as sponsors those groups in each area that landowners would be familiar with, such as the RC&D council, a soil and water conservation district and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. These groups were also asked to assist in mailing out the invitations to landowners they knew. These costs were picked up by the local groups.

The invitation was concise and made it clear that the outreach subcommittee wanted to hear from landowners their ideas for conservation strategies. At the same time, landowners could ask questions or raise concerns they had about the status of the bird and how it would affect their operations.

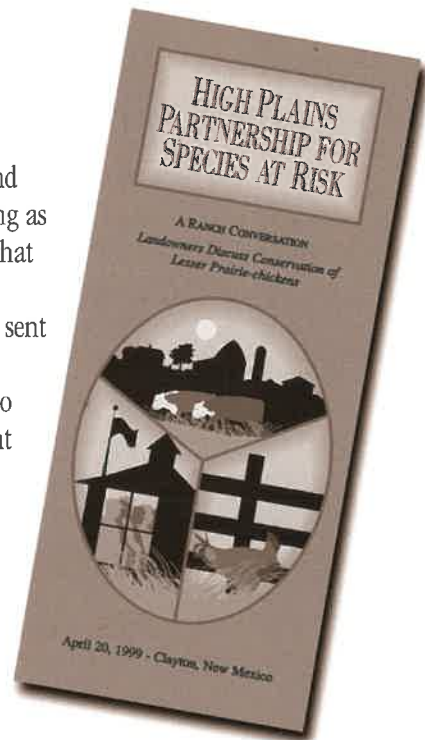
The first Ranch Conversation was held in January 1999 in Buffalo, Okla. More than 120 people turned out, 80 of whom were landowners.

More than \$50,000 was raised to support the meetings and development of this report with a matching grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 8. Funds were used for the initial organization, start-up costs, travel, direct meeting costs and publications. Other groups using this model could replicate the meetings at a substantially lower cost, depending on the scope of the project and number of meetings.

Having an Actual Conversation: Putting the Pieces Together

The format for the Ranch Conversations was developed through a cooperative effort with the goal of successfully gathering much needed information on the bird’s status and what landowners might be willing to do to assist in recovery efforts.

Admittedly, many of the private landowners and other stakeholders showed up at the Conversations wondering, “What are they going to do to me now?” Most had attended public meetings where public comments were accepted regarding a federal or state regulation and were



expecting a “business as usual” approach.

Based on survey responses, attendees found that the Ranch Conversations were different. First, a neutral third party convened the meeting – in most instances it was the local Resource Conservation and Development Council – and invited the speakers, both governmental and nongovernmental. The meeting was then facilitated by another outside party, who admitted he wouldn’t know “a lesser prairie chicken from a banty rooster” and had no preconceived notions about what it would take to improve habitat and increase the birds’ numbers.

A representative of the Western Governors’ Association opened the conversation by saying any successful effort to recover the bird population would require direct involvement of willing landowners at all levels, from the planning stages to the on-the-ground work. Biologists and other experts then briefly explained the species’ biology and natural history, based on what is currently known. But most of the meeting was a facilitated conversation with landowners, during which several questions were posed. (See Ranch Conversation Format below.) Having somewhat “spotty” data on the species’ status on private lands, biologists were eager to learn from the farmers and ranchers – the front-line conservationists. It was not lost on the wildlife and rangeland professionals that most land holdings on the Southern High Plains have remained in family ownership for generations, as far back as the 1800s. These families had a great deal of knowledge that could help in conservation efforts.

Previous WGA research and reports served as a basis for developing the meeting format and implementation strategies. Two of those reports are: “A Way of Life – Great Plains Citizens Talk about Ecosystems” (Creighton and Harwood 1996) and “Let’s Get to It – Getting Beneath Difficult Environmental Resource Debates.”

Ranch Conversation Format

- ▶ Opening Remarks
 - Brief welcome from a local community leader. Short description of who the Working Group is and what it is doing.
- ▶ Biology and Current Status of the Bird
 - Key statement to landowners: we don’t have all the answers; we are here today to listen to you, because you are the people who have lived here for generations and have invaluable on-the-ground insights.
- ▶ Landowner Discussion Group
 - Facilitated conversation for landowners revolving around the following questions:
 - Why are we here? Ground rules
 - What’s important about this area?
 - What do we value most? (our issues)
 - What are our responsibilities & roles?
- ▶ Lunch (Provided at no charge)
- ▶ Landowner Discussion Group (cont.)
 - What needs to be done?
 - What will it cost?
 - What are our assets/liabilities?
 - Do we need a partnership and who should be involved?
 - What is the next step?
- ▶ Conclusion/Summary/Evaluation
- ▶ Exit Survey of Landowners Present



Historical accounts of the lesser prairie chicken depict stories of so many birds – an icon of the southern High Plains – that they darkened the sky when traveling to and from feeding areas.

Russ Horton, wildlife biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, was honest with the landowners he talked to at the Ranch Conversations: biologists don’t have all the answers; they don’t know why the bird population is shrinking so drastically.

“We truly don’t know much about this bird. Unlike a number of species, there is little research, and what is out there, isn’t extensive enough to draw any conclusions,” Horton said. “Hopefully, we can find the answers together. If I had all the answers, we wouldn’t be here today.”

Horton said historical numbers may never be seen again, but it would take the agencies and landowners communicating with each other and working together to help the bird recover.

Ranch Conversation in Buffalo, Okla.

Keys to a Successful Ranch Conversation

- ▶ Philosophy brought to the Conversations – “We are here to work together”
- ▶ Willingness to try a new approach and risk being attacked
- ▶ Diverse group participated on the Outreach Subcommittee
- ▶ Local support of groups and agencies that work daily with private landowners, such as the Farm Bureau, NRCS and RC&D
- ▶ Meetings were held at the time of year when landowners are available, which varies by state and region
- ▶ Openness of the Conversation – everyone participates and all statements are recorded
- ▶ Meeting facilitated by an outside facilitator
- ▶ Lunch was provided on location
- ▶ Attitude that organizers were there to ask questions, not pass edicts
- ▶ Emphasis on the need to work together and to communicate
- ▶ Capitalized on participants' knowledge and willingness to be involved
- ▶ Emphasized that action would be taken on what was learned

What Was Learned

Participants who filled out the exit surveys were asked to evaluate the Ranch Conversation and provide information about lesser prairie chicken populations, if any, on their property. A total 231 meeting participants completed, or partially completed, the surveys. (A complete summary of the surveys is available on the Western Governors' Association Web site at

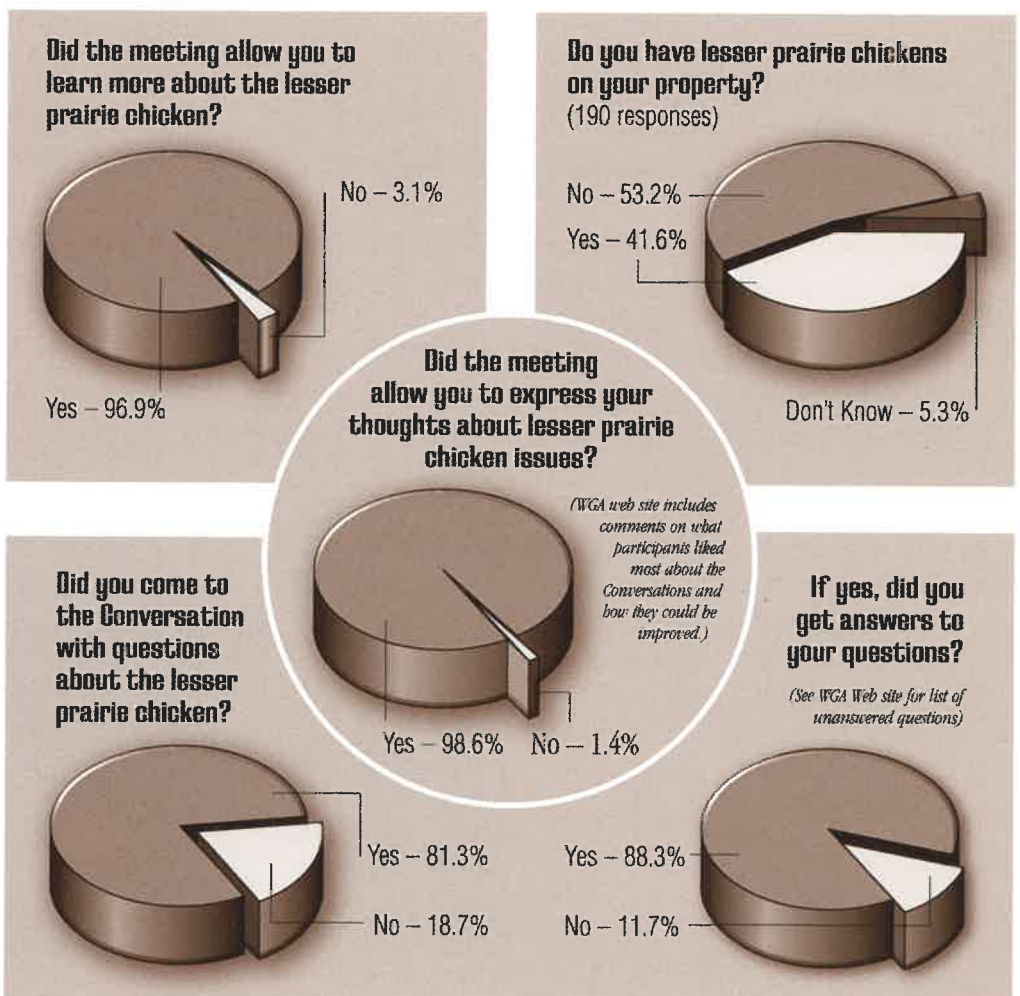
<http://www.westgov.org/wga/initiatives/HighPlains/hppbroch.htm>)

Results in the five states were similar. Participants were very interested in the status of the bird and any management decisions or policies that could affect natural resource issues on their property. They wanted to be updated regularly on the status of the bird, future activities, and successes. They did not want the process to end with one meeting and inquired about opportunities to participate in Work Group annual meetings and other professional meetings. Landowners and other participants also made their own recommendations for future Conversations, potential field days, special events and newsletters.

Following is a sample of the survey questions and responses. In some cases the percentages do not equal 100 percent, when more than one box was checked.



Ranch Conversation in Durham, Okla.



Building on Trust

Although a majority of landowners who attended the Ranch Conversations indicated a willingness to continue the conversation and possibly work with the agencies on conservation efforts, many remained skeptical. For them, the word “trust” had been tarnished by previous experiences. Because perception is reality, the state and federal agencies had to prove they could be trusted.

The Ranch Conversations created an opportunity to build new relationships with landowners based upon the open, more relaxed dialogue that had been established. Phone numbers and other information were shared with promises to “keep in touch.” It didn’t take long for landowners, biologists and natural resource professionals to get together again – where it counted – on the



Dan O’Hair a rancher from Harper County Okla.

rangeland. Landowners, no doubt, learned a great deal about the plight of the lesser prairie chicken from biologists who walked the land with them; but equally important, the biologists learned first hand about the struggles facing agriculture producers. They began to view each other as committed partners.

Dan O’Hair of Harper County, Okla., was one of those landowners impressed with this new approach. He told “Outdoor Oklahoma,” a television program produced by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation: “These government folks were different. They came out to our place and were genuinely concerned about

the (prairie chicken) as well as our family. They have been open and honest and just a pleasure to work with.”

Kenny Knowles was one of many ranchers who stepped to the microphone at a Ranch Conversation in Buffalo, Okla. He offered his advice on what he suspects has happened to the lesser prairie chicken population and what might be done to turn the situation around:

“For years I have watched chicken numbers decline, and I thought I was the only one that noticed it. My family has lived and ranched around Arnett for four generations. I grew up hunting chickens and I hope some day to be able to hunt them again.”

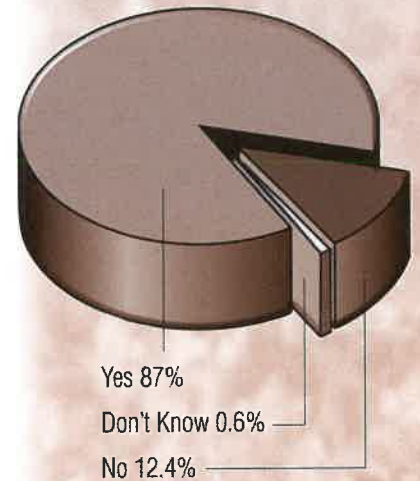
“I don’t have all the answers, but for what it is worth, I think that the decline of small family farms has had a substantial impact on chicken populations. For years, this country was dotted by small 160-acre farms, and everyone raised head feed (redtop cane, sorghum etc.). Chickens would flock to the bundled feed in the winter.”

“If you look around today, nobody raises head feed. If they do, it is small food plots, which end up feeding more deer and turkeys than chickens. This may not be the answer, but if some form of financial assistance was available for planting larger acreages of spring planted milo and feed grain crop for winter food, I think it could help. And I would sure be interested in participating.”

This new trust led to the next critical step: landowners stepping forward to undertake the necessary management practices that would help recover the lesser prairie chicken.

Continuing the Dialogue

The exit survey at the Ranch Conversations measured landowner interest in continuing the dialogue. When asked if they would be interested in assisting with a lesser prairie chicken task force in their county, 177 people responded:



It is important to note that landowners who wanted to participate on a task force could remain anonymous. The Working Group also thought it was important to keep confidential information related to lesser prairie chickens on landowners’ property, since it is considered a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act.

Incentives, Regulatory Assurances: Getting On-the-ground Results



Jim Bill Anderson, rancher from Canadian, Texas

The Ranch Conversations identified two primary obstacles that discourage landowners from making habitat improvements: 1) the costs of restoring, enhancing and maintaining healthy rangeland; and 2) the threat of regulatory restrictions if lesser prairie chickens are identified on property and later become federally listed. Since the Conversations, habitat improvement costs have been made available through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's ESA Landowner Incentive Program. To address the issue of regulatory restrictions, the service created a new program in 1999 called Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances. The Tulsa Field Office proposed the use of CCAAs for the lesser prairie chicken.

Under these voluntary agreements, nonfederal property owners manage their land and/or water in ways that are beneficial to candidate or proposed species. In return, they are given assurances that their efforts will not result in future regulatory obligations not already agreed to.

Among the conservation practices implemented under the program are:

- ▶ cross fencing and water development to facilitate grazing systems that provide sufficient growing season rest to increase rangeland health and residual herbaceous cover,
- ▶ prescribed burning and mechanical treatments to control tree encroachment,
- ▶ reseeding cultivated or degraded lands with native species endemic to the site, and
- ▶ transplanting or reseeding native shrubs into previously farmed or treated areas.

Over the past two years, 21 landowners have entered into individually negotiated conservation agreements with the Fish and Wildlife Service, covering more than 84,000 acres of lesser prairie chicken habitat. Another 200 landowners with nearly 200,000 acres have been placed on a waiting list, because there is not sufficient federal funding to meet the need. In several cases, these proposed projects would be expanded to benefit not only the lesser prairie chicken, but also swift fox, black-tailed prairie dogs, mountain plover, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, Arkansas River darter and Arkansas River shiner.

Jim Bill Anderson, a third generation rancher from Canadian, Texas, already had begun management practices to improve habitat for lesser prairie chicken and other species, including black-tailed prairie dogs, when he was approached about entering into a conservation agreement.

"I was able to do some of the things that needed to be done a lot faster. The cost-share funding sped up by about three years what I was able to do," Anderson said. "I think landowners will find that these practices will make their grasslands more profitable. So you're doing the most econom-

1994

- States meet informally on declining bird populations



1995

- Biodiversity Legal Foundation petitions for ESA listing

1996

- Five states create Working Group

1997

- 31,000 newsletters and surveys mailed to stakeholders

1998

- Idea for "Ranch Conversations" initiated



1999

- Ten Ranch Conversations conducted in spring
- \$380,000 in funding for conservation agreements initiated
- Assessment and Conservation Strategy Plan published

ically viable thing, and it's also the most responsible stewardship direction you can take. They go hand in hand."

Sylvia Gillen, an Assistant State Conservationist with the Natural Resource Conservation Service in Kansas, said the conservation agreements developed for the lesser prairie chicken have been used as a prototype for other species in other states. Gillen managed the High Plains Partnership effort while on loan from NRCS to the Western Governors' Association from 1996 to 2000.

"We first shared a model agreement with the state of Wyoming, which wanted to address multiple species in the Thunder Basin National Grassland area," Gillen said. "That's a high priority area for black-footed ferret reintroduction. State officials were also looking at prairie dog management, as well as sage grouse and mountain plover. What they hope to do with a CCAA is address all those species within the ecosystem under one agreement."

Both Wyoming and Nevada have working groups that have begun strategic planning for involving landowners in sage grouse conservation and are reviewing the use of CCAAs.



Prescribed burning is one habitat management tool used by landowners.

Congress, Administration Hear from Landowners

Many landowners were so enthusiastic about this voluntary, non-confrontational approach to conservation that they have met with and sought support from members of Congress. Ranchers invited them to meetings in their states, gave tours of their property to see the work being done, and traveled to Washington to meet with individual members of Congress, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation Caucus and nonprofit groups. Senator James Inhofe and Representative Frank Lucas of Oklahoma sponsored the briefing for the Sportsmen's Caucus in July 2000.

Jim Bill Anderson was one of those ranchers to make the trek from Texas back East.

"I really believe this is what we need to be doing," he said. "People in my part of the world, as well as people in Washington, need to understand each other. We need to have a good dialogue going all the time.

"I wanted to believe this would work and landowners would be directly involved in developing solutions. I left the meeting at Buffalo thinking that would be the end, of what should have been the beginning, of putting some of the good, shared ideas to work on-the-ground to help the chickens. When I found out it was going to happen locally, I was walking six inches taller.

"With my past experience with government – programs coming from Washington down – this approach is the right direction for future government programs. The concept of the program being developed from the grassroots level, using scientific data and the practical experiences of people who know how to put ideas to work is a welcomed and needed change."

— Kenny Knowles,
Oklahoma rancher



- Texas Parks and Wildlife hosts landowner field day
- Oklahoma landowners meet with U.S. Senator

2000

- Landowners and agencies visit Congress twice seeking support
- Candidate Conservation Agreements funded with ESA Landowner Incentives Program (\$240,000)

- Follow-up Ranch Conversations held
- Comanche Pool hosts landowner resource day



2001

- Congressional visits continue
- Ranch Conversations held on Arkansas River shiner
- Buffalo, Okla. and Canadian, Texas host prairie chicken festivals

Landowners Seek Congressional Support

In early 2000, several stakeholders contacted the Western Governors' Association to see what they could do to help garner congressional support for conservation incentives. Two trips to the nation's capital were arranged. Landowners from Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico held 25 meetings with members of Congress and their staff. In addition, they met with high-ranking administration officials within the Departments of Agriculture and the Fish and Wildlife Agency. Meetings were also arranged with agricultural, environmental and conservation organizations.

In July 2000, several stakeholders organized a second Washington D.C. trip. The original coalition was joined by Wyoming ranchers with similar concerns for managing black-tailed prairie dogs. More than 80 members of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation Caucus attended a breakfast meeting in July 2000.



Rep. Frank Lucas (Okla.), second from right, discusses landowner conservation efforts with David Wilcove, Environmental Defense, and Oklahoma ranchers Kenny Knowles and Meade Ferguson.

the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and state demonstration projects for at-risk species. Those governors who signed the letter were: Dirk Kempthorne, Idaho, WGA Chairman; Jane Dee Hull, Ariz., WGA Vice Chairman; Tony Knowles, Alaska; Gray Davis, Calif.; Ben Cayetano, Hawaii; Marc Racicot, Mont.; Mike Johanns, Neb.; Gary Johnson, N.M.; Kenny Guinn, Nev.; Ed Schafer, N.D.; John Kitzhaber, Ore.; Bill Janklow, S.D.; Mike Leavitt, Utah; and Jim Geringer, Wyo. Efforts are still underway to secure funding that would assist landowners waiting to sign conservation agreements and to expand the program to cover other species in the five states that occupy the northern portion of the High Plains.

In their letter, Western Governors noted that reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act is their highest legislative priority and "... it is critical to properly fund the Act to enable states and private landowners to be partners in meeting the goals of the Act and to demonstrate new ways to effectively meet them." WGA has sought improvements to the Act that would give new tools to landowners and water users to help conserve species, enhance the states' role in ESA processes, increase public participation and the role of science, elevate recovery of listed species to the status of listing species, and make the delisting process more efficient for species that are recovered.

The governors have also long supported improving environmental and natural resources management using the "Enlibra" principles. Derived from two Latin words to represent balance and stewardship, Enlibra calls for local leadership to resolve environmental and natural resource challenges. The principles recognize the need for a variety of tools beyond regulation, including:

- ▶ incentives to assist those who take actions to enhance the environment;
- ▶ greater public participation and collaboration in decision-making;
- ▶ science for objective data gathering; and
- ▶ rewarding results by moving to performance-based systems.

"If they're really serious about helping species, they have to work with private landowners. You can have all the rules you want on public lands out West, but you're not going to have the really big results if you don't coordinate with private landowners."

The Western Governors' Association assisted in arranging the Washington meetings. In addition, 14 governors signed a letter to congressional leaders supporting new funding for the ESA Landowner Incentive Program,



Prairie chickens are captured briefly to perform biological tests. They are also fit with radio collars to monitor their movements within the habitat.

Leading the Way at Home

Since the first Ranch Conversations were held, many landowners have gotten together at follow-up meetings with their neighbors, agency personnel and new people interested in the process. In April 2000, approximately 80 people convened at the Harper County Fairgrounds in Buffalo, Okla. to get an update on the status of the bird and management activities on private lands. The names of landowners and details of signed agreements are not made public, however, several landowners volunteered information and provided testimonials on working with state and federal agency personnel.

Oklahoma rancher Kenny Knowles traveled to eastern New Mexico to discuss his experiences with 50 ranchers at a very informal gathering. Afterwards, numerous landowners began discussing potential projects and opportunities with state and federal agencies.

During the Ranch Conversations, field days were identified as a good opportunity for natural resource professionals and landowners to learn from each other. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department organized the first field day near Canadian, Texas in September 1999. Over 100 landowners from Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas spent the day learning about a variety of management practices beneficial to wildlife, including lesser prairie chickens. Using a landscape approach to wildlife conservation, biologists used the opportunity to discuss white-tailed deer, quail and turkey management issues.

A second field day was coordinated by a group of conservation-minded ranchers in southwest Kansas and northwest Oklahoma, known as the Comanche Pool Prairie Resource Foundation. Several high-ranking officials with federal and state natural resource agencies attended the two-day outing near Medicine Lodge, Kansas. The Comanche Pool was recently awarded \$50,000 by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to team up with local natural resource officials and to provide technical assistance to area ranchers. This local approach to conservation clearly stemmed from the success of the Ranch Conversations.

New Mexico rancher Jim Weaver has worked tirelessly on behalf of sound grazing management practices and prairie chicken conservation. Weaver, who signed an agreement with the Service in 1999, frequently hosts field days on his 15-thousand acre ranch near Causey. He said many in the agricultural community are providing habitat for the lesser prairie chicken and other species, but it can be costly.

"The problem is it boils down to money. If there's no money, nothing's going to happen," Weaver said, noting the tremendous downturn in agricultural prices and increased costs for maintaining a ranching operation. "To expect the rancher to pick up the tab to fix what's happened to the environment over the past 150 years is an unrealistic view."



New Mexico Rancher Jim Weaver describes to visitors the range management practices he has undertaken to conserve the lesser prairie chicken.

Ranch Conversation Survey Question -

Would you attend similar meetings to learn and talk about other important wildlife conservation issues facing the High Plains?



Weaver has teamed up with the El Llano Estacado and High Plains Resource and Conservation Development Councils to obtain a \$100,000 NFWF grant to assist area landowners in their conservation efforts.

In some areas, whole communities have gotten involved in combined public education and economic development efforts. Buffalo, Oklahoma and Canadian, Texas have hosted spring festivals to attract tourists, who come to observe the birds on their “booming grounds,” so named for the sound males make when trying to attract females during the mating season.

Continuing the Conversation

The lesser prairie chicken is one of scores of wildlife species declining on the High Plains. This prairie icon and other native grassland-dependent species are more likely to recover by using voluntary measures to develop sound grazing management systems that result in healthy range conditions.

Species such as the black-tailed prairie dog and Arkansas River shiner are among the species that have declined significantly across this region and are viewed as more challenging conservation efforts. The trust developed with landowners to date can't automatically be transferred to

these more contentious species. However, many of those making habitat improvements to conserve lesser prairie chickens have taken measures to assist the prairie dog and shiner.

The High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk has established a model for voluntary, incentive-driven conservation efforts. New partnerships, supported by adequate funding, can do much to conserve other declining species on the High Plains and maintain rural lifestyles across the West.



Contacts and Web Sites

Kenneth M. Giesen
Wildlife Researcher
Colorado Division of Wildlife
317 W. Prospect Road
Ft. Collins CO 80526
<http://www.dnr.state.co.us/>

Randy Rogers
Wildlife Research Biologist
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks
P.O. Box 338
Hays KS 67601
<http://www.kdwp.state.ks.us/>

Michael Massey
Lesser Prairie Chicken Biologist
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
P.O. Box 25112
Santa Fe NM 87504
<http://www.gmfsh.state.nm.us/>

Colin Berg
Education Supervisor
Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
P.O. Box 4642
Tulsa OK 74159
<http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/>

Russ Horton
Senior Wildlife Biologist
Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
1801 N. Lincoln
Oklahoma City OK 73105

Robert M. Sullivan, Ph.D.
Wildlife Ecologist
Texas Parks and Wildlife
P.O. Box 659
Canyon TX 79015
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/>

Randy Randall
Natural Resources Consultant
Western Governors' Association
1515 Cleveland Place, Suite 200
Denver CO 80202
www.westgov.org/wga/initiatives/HighPlains/hppbroch.htm

Sylvia Gillen
Assistant State Conservationist
Natural Resources Conservation Service
107 Layton
Dodge City KS 67801
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/>

Erich Langer
Outreach Coordinator
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
222 S. Houston, Suite A
Tulsa OK 74127-8909
<http://ifw2es.fws.gov/tulsafo/>

Stacey Eriksen
Community Environmental Program
Coordinator
US Environmental Protection Agency
999 18th St. Suite 300 SEPR-EP
Denver, CO 80802-2466
http://www.epa.gov/region8/community_resources/cbep/cbep.html



Acknowledgements

Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group

Core Committee Members:

Steve Arey, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Colin Berg, (Working Group Chairman)
Oklahoma Department of Wildlife
Conservation
Reggie Blackwell, U.S. Forest Service
Rand French, Bureau of Land
Management
Ken Giesen, Colorado Division of Wildlife
Wendell Gilgert, Natural Resources
Conservation Service (NRCS)
Sylvia Gillen, Natural Resources
Conservation Service
Stephanie Harmon, U.S. Fish &
Wildlife Service
Mike Massey, New Mexico Department
of Game and Fish
Randy Randall, Western Governors'
Association (WGA)
Randy Rogers, Kansas Department
of Wildlife and Parks
Bob Sullivan, Texas Parks & Wildlife

Implementation/Outreach/ Education Subcommittee:

Bob Appel, Coordinator, NRCS, Southeast
Colorado RC&D
Colin Berg, Oklahoma Department
of Wildlife Conservation
Travis Bosley, Facilitator
Bob Bruce, Coordinator, NRCS, El Llano
Estacado RC&D
Andrea Crews, Oklahoma Department
of Wildlife Conservation
John Crowell, Coordinator, NRCS, North
Rolling Plains RC&D
Karen Deike, WGA
Stacey Ericksen, U. S. Environmental
Protection Agency, Region 8



Ed Gorman, Colorado Department
of Wildlife
Lois Herman, Audubon Society, New
Mexico Chapter
Russ Horton, Oklahoma Department
of Wildlife
Erich Langer, (Committee Chairman)
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Tom Lucas, Coordinator, NRCS, High
Plains RC&D
Gene Miller, Texas Parks and Wildlife
Department
Don Petty, Texas Farm Bureau
Randy Randall, WGA
Stan Rice, Coordinator, ASCOG Resource,
Conservation and Development
Council (RC&D)
Ellen Stein, Western Governors'
Association consultant
Vicki Sybert, Texas Parks and Wildlife
Department
Jeff Yost, Colorado Division of Wildlife

The High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk:

Colorado Division of Wildlife
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks
New Mexico Department of Game
and Fish
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Oklahoma Department of Wildlife
Conservation
Western Governors' Association
US Fish and Wildlife Service
US Forest Service (Comanche, Cimarron,
Kiowa, Rita Blanca & Black Kettle
National Grasslands)
Bureau of Land Management
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Native American Tribes
George M. Sutton Avian Research Center
American Farm Bureau Federation
Texas Farm Bureau
National Cattlemen's Beef Association
Oklahoma Conservation Commission
Oklahoma State University Cooperative
Extension
Southeast Colorado RC&D (CO)
El Llano Estacado RC&D (NM)
Great Plains RC&D (OK)
High Plains RC&D (OK)
Rolling Plains RC&D (OK)
Wheatland RC&D (OK)
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Carl Smith, Wheatland RC&D, Oklahoma
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Jim Shearhart, NRCS, Oklahoma
Brooke Taylor NRCS, Oklahoma
Rosendo Trevino, NRCS, New Mexico
Beth Van Horn, Oklahoma Department of Commerce
Kenny Walker, NRCS, New Mexico
Jim Weaver, New Mexico rancher
Jim Williams, New Mexico rancher



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Western Governors' Association

Ranch Conversations: A Blueprint for Conserving Species and Rural Lifestyles

A Publication of the Western Governors' Association,
High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk and
Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group

The Western Governors' Association is an independent, nonprofit organization representing the governors of 18 states, American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. Through their Association, the Western governors identify and address key policy and governance issues in natural resources, the environment, human services, economic development, international relations and public management. Information on the association is available on the Web at www.westgov.org.

The High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk is a multi-state initiative designed to promote collaboration and cooperation among a wide variety of interests including state and federal agencies and private landowners. A goal of the partnership is to devise voluntary solutions to the problem of declining abundance of wildlife in the region, while strengthening local economies and social structures. The Western Governors' Association serves as the coordinating entity and funding administrator for the High Plains Partnership.

As part of the broader initiative, the Lesser Prairie Chicken Interstate Working Group was formed through the efforts of state wildlife agencies from Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma to address on a regional basis conservation issues related specifically to the lesser prairie chicken.

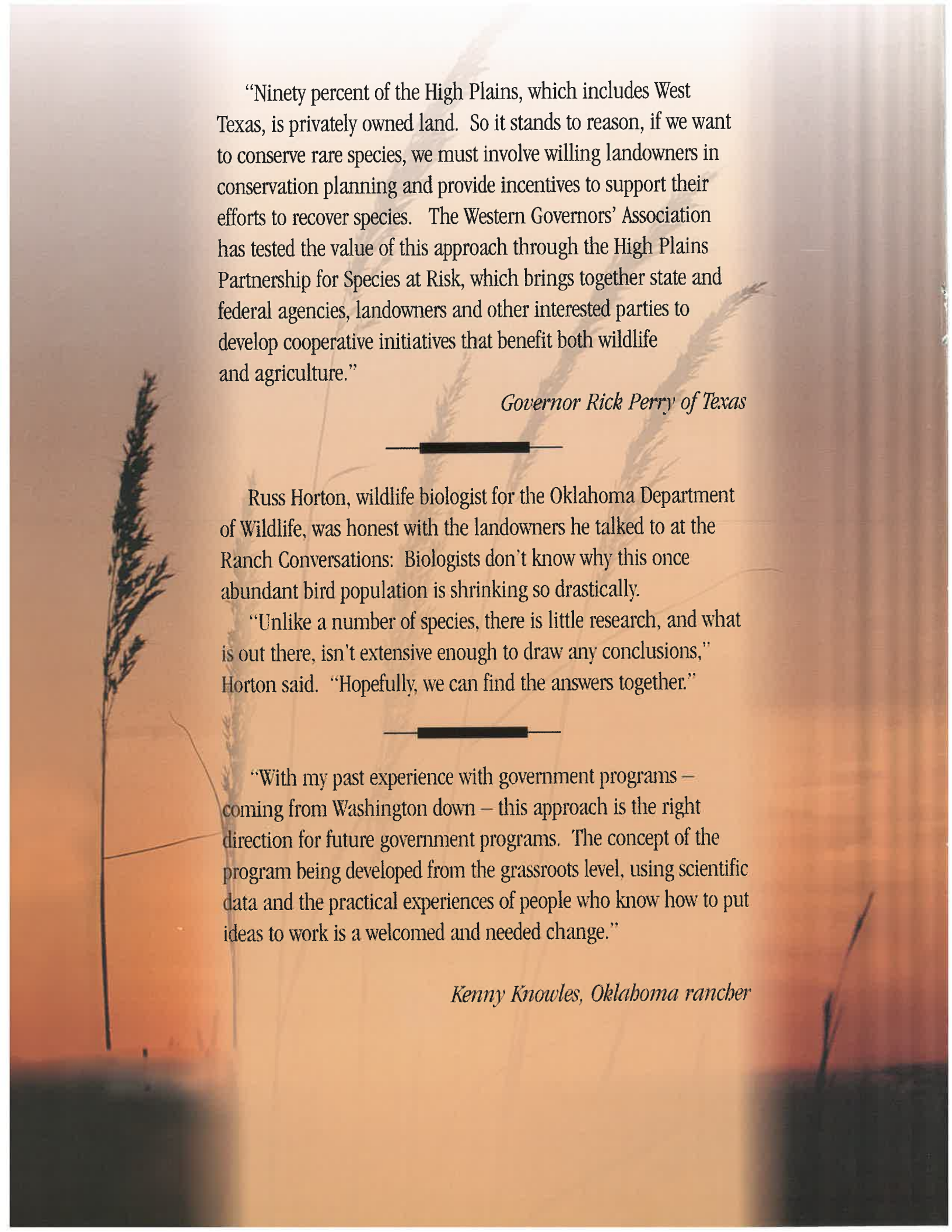
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“Ninety percent of the High Plains, which includes West Texas, is privately owned land. So it stands to reason, if we want to conserve rare species, we must involve willing landowners in conservation planning and provide incentives to support their efforts to recover species. The Western Governors’ Association has tested the value of this approach through the High Plains Partnership for Species at Risk, which brings together state and federal agencies, landowners and other interested parties to develop cooperative initiatives that benefit both wildlife and agriculture.”

Governor Rick Perry of Texas

Russ Horton, wildlife biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife, was honest with the landowners he talked to at the Ranch Conversations: Biologists don’t know why this once abundant bird population is shrinking so drastically.

“Unlike a number of species, there is little research, and what is out there, isn’t extensive enough to draw any conclusions,” Horton said. “Hopefully, we can find the answers together.”

“With my past experience with government programs – coming from Washington down – this approach is the right direction for future government programs. The concept of the program being developed from the grassroots level, using scientific data and the practical experiences of people who know how to put ideas to work is a welcomed and needed change.”

Kenny Knowles, Oklahoma rancher