



Alaina Gerrits
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Re: Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society/Wisconsin Backcountry Hunters & Anglers Comments on the Draft Prairie Chicken Management Plan, 2022-2032

The Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (WSGS) in conjunction with the Wisconsin Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (WIBHA) appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the draft 2022-2032 Prairie Chicken Management Plan. We applaud the effort that staff and partners have put into this draft document. WSGS and WIBHA with their combined 1200+ members continue to be an advocate for sharp-tails, barrens habitat, and public lands in our state. Although not part of our stated mission, we are vitally interested in ensuring the future of the other native prairie grouse species in Wisconsin, the greater prairie chicken.

·WSGS and WIBHA favor Alternative #2, an aggressive plan to **increase** prairie chicken numbers and ensure that this iconic species remains as part of the Wisconsin landscape. It's important to note that we would not support Alternative #2 as it is stated, to "Maintain or Possibly Increase the GRPC Population". Merely maintaining the current population level is not an option in our view. We feel it is imperative to increase current prairie chicken populations within the core properties to that level which existed prior to the precipitous decline that occurred in 2007, as a minimum goal. There is a sense of urgency here that will require a major re-investment in budgeting and staffing.

·WSGS and WIBHA feel strongly that all management efforts directed towards prairie chickens for the duration of the 10-year management plan be focused entirely and exclusively on the three managed prairie chicken properties, Buena Vista, Leola, and Paul Olson. Alternative #2 provides the resources necessary to restore both the quantity and the quality of grassland habitat within the managed properties to previous levels. We cannot afford to lose these core chicken populations, and any resources spent elsewhere in the state will only dilute the effort required on these core properties.

·Approximately 80 percent of the 100,000+ acres within the three core properties is privately owned. We need to make a concerted effort to significantly increase the acreage of grassland habitat on these private lands within the property boundaries and reverse the long-term trend toward more circle pivot row cropping on Buena Vista and Leola. Developing a working relationship with these private landowners is imperative. Funding will be needed to pursue an aggressive private lands incentive program. Emerging conservation grazing techniques should be investigated. Hiring someone assigned to the properties who is knowledgeable about and experienced in grazing techniques and grassland management would be very beneficial.

·WSGS and WIBHA do not believe that attempting to establish an additional prairie chicken population elsewhere in the state is justifiable at this time. It does not appear to us that a sufficiently large block of grassland habitat exists to support a new prairie chicken population, despite gains made in current grassland conservation areas. If at the end of ten years the core chicken populations on the managed properties have been restored to previous levels, then translocation efforts may be justified. To attempt this now would only dilute funding necessary to restore the core populations. This point is why WSGS and WIBHA are supporting Alternative #2 as opposed to Alternative #1. It should be noted that past prairie chicken translocation efforts have been very expensive and often have failed to establish new populations.

·Land and easement acquisition outside the three managed property boundaries is a major expenditure as proposed in Alternative 2. With the likelihood of less than full funding, this would further dilute management efforts on the core properties and the core prairie chicken population. There likely will be some land acquisition/easement opportunities or land trades within the project boundaries that may be justified, i.e., consolidating larger blocks of land to facilitate grazing, burning, or other habitat management activities. For the duration of the ten-year plan, we would discourage land and easement acquisition outside current property boundaries. We would support continued land and easement acquisition on the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area if that can be accomplished with other funding sources not proposed as part of this ten-year plan.

·The funding level proposed for Alternative #2 (\$2.8 million annually) is laudable, but probably optimistic. In any case, we encourage WDNR to aggressively pursue alternate funding sources for prairie chickens. In the past most of the cost for managing chickens has been provided by hunter-generated dollars, despite Wisconsin prairie chickens being listed as a "Threatened" species for over thirty years. More and diverse partners are needed to help fund the ten-year management plan (i.e., NHC, Nature Conservancy, Audubon, WSO, RAWA etc.) As we all know, the habitat that prairie chickens require also provides critical habitat for many other native grassland-dependent species. Finally, there seems to be a lack of an effective support or "Friends" group ever since the Tympanuchus Society exited the scene. These groups can provide significant support - which Wisconsin prairie chickens can certainly use - in addition to any fund-raising efforts. Friends groups have been created on at least 14 wildlife management properties in Wisconsin, with very beneficial results.

·A new USDA "Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities Program" may offer some unintended benefits to grassland bird habitat that should be investigated. It will promote farming, ranching, and forestry practices that cut greenhouse gas emissions or capture and store climate warming carbon. Funding for approved projects is for up to 5 years. Project applications by qualified public and private entities, including state and local governments, non-profits, and colleges and universities for up to \$100 million must be submitted by April 8, 2022. Project applications for less than \$5 million have until May 27, 2022.

Thanks for your efforts on behalf of Wisconsin's prairie chickens. If we can further assist in developing or implementing the prairie chicken plan, please let us know.

Dave Evenson, President
Wisconsin Sharp-tailed Grouse Society

Joe Steffen, Chairperson
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