On July 19, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) removed the Lesser Prairie Chicken from the endangered species list, on which the species was listed as threatened (one step below endangered) beginning in April 2014.

This move followed the September 2015 holding by Judge Robert Junnell of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas that vacated the agency’s listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act for failure to properly evaluate the states’ conservation plans already in place.

The suit was filed by the Permian Basin Petroleum Association (based in Texas), as well as several counties in New Mexico after the USFWS first listed the bird as threatened.

Despite the removal of the lesser prairie chicken from the endangered species list, the USFWS has stated they have no intention of appealing the decision, but plan to continue reviewing scientific data to best evaluate the status of the species.

“Responding to this court ruling by removing the bird from the Federal List does not mean we are walking away from efforts to conserve the lesser prairie-chicken. Far from it,” USFWS Director Dan Ashe said in a statement. “We are undertaking a new status review to determine whether listing is again warranted, and we will continue to work with our state partners and others on efforts to protect vital habitat and ensure this flagship of the prairies survives well into the future.”

The lesser prairie chicken is primarily found in Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas, with about 95 percent of the bird’s range on private lands. The species has been considered in trouble for two decades, and bird’s range of grassland and prairies has been reduced by an estimated 84 percent.

Since the implementation of the states’ conservation plan, the chickens’ population in the wild has dropped 13 percent. The chickens also serve as an indicator of the health of the grasslands, which support local economies and wildlife.

While conservation groups are concerned about the USFWS removing the bird before having prepared another listing, the decision is being hailed by a number of Republican Members of Congress, including Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, who is also the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman.

“I am glad that the court agreed with me and the 9 Senators, representing all five states, who told FWS in 2013 that the states' conservation plan should have time to be implemented before a listing can be properly assessed,” Inhofe said in a press release. “That time has come, and I expect the states' plan will prove successful in addressing the [lesser prairie chicken] population while also supporting the unique economic needs of each state and their communities.”

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