

CONSERVATION Showcase

What's Good for the Prairie Chicken is Good for Cattle

“What’s good for the Lesser Prairie Chicken is good for cattle,” Jim Weaver, Causey area rancher, told KOAT-TV Action 7 News at a recent visit to the Weaver ranch. And, Weaver has set out to prove it for his children and a greater New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma area.

Weaver has worked with many agencies during his lifespan to advance his passion for ornithology (the science of birds), and has welcomed the NRCS Portales Field Office and its expertise in brush control to develop the mosaic of shinnery oak and grassland that makes his ranch the crown jewel it is.

NRCS has assisted Weaver through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program to treat acres of the ranch that were wall-to-wall shinnery oak. While shinnery oak provides cover and harbors insects that benefit Lesser Prairie Chicken broods, too much of a good thing precludes the grasslands that this grouse needs – for it is a grassland species.

The grasslands that the Lesser Prairie Chicken needs, also responds to Weaver’s goal which is to develop wildlife habitat while operating an economically viable ranch. While Weaver’s original background was ornithology, his passion for critters extends to the cattle he is raising.

He runs a cow-calf operation that features Mashona cattle, a breed native to Zimbabwe. Frozen Mashona embryos from Zimbabwe were introduced to the Weaver Ranch in 1997. This gentle breed is smaller than most European breeds and is well-suited to the climate and conditions of the Weaver ranch.

“Cattle thrive in the wide open spaces that meet the Lesser



Prairie Chicken’s requirements,” said Scotty Savage, Portales district conservationist. “Fragmenting the landscape is seen as the biggest threat to these birds that thrive in broad grassland areas.”

The number of Lesser Prairie Chickens has declined since historic times, however, the efforts of conservationists like Jim Weaver have turned this trend around in New Mexico. The minimum population estimate prepared by the New Mexico Game and Fish has more than doubled since 2001, and their count increased from 6300 in 2007 to 8000 in 2008. This shows a healthy turnaround in the state.

The efforts of many have been proactive – helping the populations on its return to healthy levels before it became necessary to list the bird on the Endangered Species list. Jim Weaver is no stranger to partnerships and such a challenge for he was a co-founder of The Peregrine Fund, an organization dedicated to preserving the peregrine falcon and other birds of prey. Thanks to the hard work of the Fund and its partners, the peregrine recovered and was removed from the endangered species list in 1999.

For additional information about NRCS’s participation in the return of the Lesser Prairie Chicken contact Scotty Savage at the Portales Field Office at 575-356-6629 or Joe Whitehead at the East Area Office at 575-762-4769.

