

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

The State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative is a locally led effort to address high-value wildlife habitat restoration. SAFE empowers the public, producers, state and federal agencies, conservation organizations, and others to work together to identify geographic areas where new CRP acreage should be enrolled to address the habitat needs of specific Endangered, Threatened, or high-priority fish and wildlife species. There are currently 90 SAFE projects in 36 states and Puerto Rico targeting species that range from grassland songbirds to waterfowl, Indiana bats to Mississippi black bear.

Prioritizing Prairie Grouse with SAFE

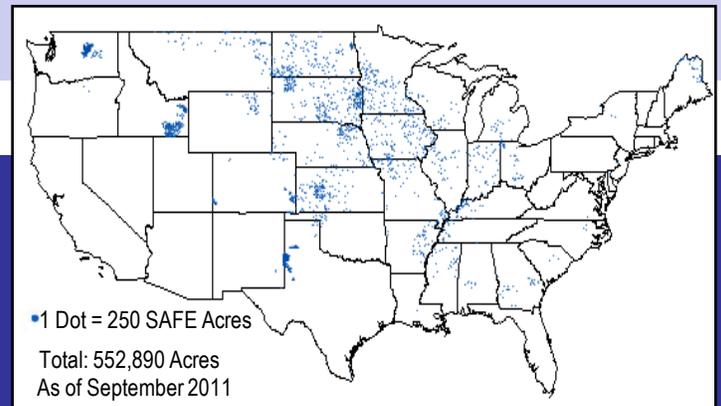
Among FSA's highest SAFE priorities are prairie grouse species. Prairie grouse include sharp-tailed grouse and all species of prairie chicken, and our expansive definition also includes sage-grouse. Prairie grouse are classic indicator organisms – we can infer the condition of their native grassland and shrubland ecosystems based on the health of their populations.

As the grasslands and shrublands of the Great Plains and Northwest have been lost, many populations of these charismatic birds have plummeted. FSA has directed a significant portion of all SAFE acres to the partner-led SAFE projects targeting prairie grouse, and FSA is committed to working with partners to reach full enrollment of these allocated acres.

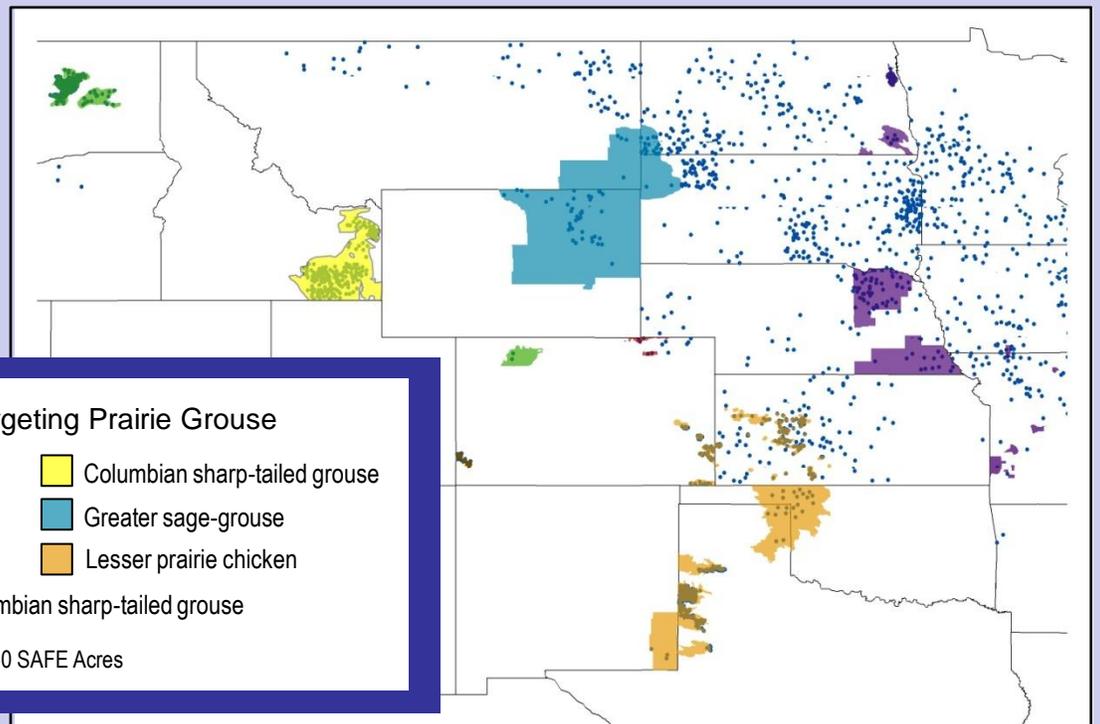
FSA is one of many stakeholders prioritizing prairie grouse conservation. Many federal and state agencies and conservation organizations are making on-the-ground efforts to raise interest in private lands programs (including CRP) that help prairie grouse. FSA's prairie grouse initiatives are also important tools supporting the Grassland Conservation Plan for Prairie Grouse (coordinated by the North American Grouse Partnership¹), and the many state and federal agency recovery plans for sage-grouse (as outlined in the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats²).

SAFE Enrollment

There are currently 90 SAFE projects nationwide. All projects were designed through collaborative partnerships to benefit a variety of priority wildlife species.



Over 380,000 acres of SAFE have been allocated to projects directly targeting prairie grouse species – or 45% of all SAFE acres.



sharp-tailed grouse, resulting in significant population increases and a range expansion of approximately 400 percent.⁴ Columbian sharp-tail populations are also benefitting from sage-grouse SAFE projects in areas where the two overlap in Colorado, Washington, and Wyoming.

Idaho populations are particularly critical to the recovery of this subspecies. Idaho supports between an estimated 59 and 66 percent of the remaining Columbian sharp-tail population in the United States. Approximately 70 percent of Columbian sharp-tail habitat in Idaho is on private land, and CRP has long been a critical tool for the species' recovery there. Of the 172 new sharp-tail breeding grounds found in southeastern Idaho from 1995-1998, more than 80% were in CRP.⁵ Since the program's introduction in 1985, CRP has actually contributed to an increase in Columbian sharp-tail populations in Idaho – despite the overall downward trend across most of the range. Over 400,000 acres of CRP are currently enrolled in Columbian sharp-tail range in Idaho.

Possible loss of CRP lands is the single most important immediate threat to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse in the state. To help keep habitat on the ground, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game reached out to FSA to create the Idaho Columbian sharp-tailed grouse SAFE. The SAFE project has been wildly successful – Idaho is on track to sign up all of its 94,300 allocated acres – benefitting both producers and wildlife.



Landowners lined up outside the Power County USDA office on Oct. 3, 2011 on the morning of a new Idaho SAFE sign-up.

Idaho SAFE habitat . / IDFG



Lesser Prairie Chicken



Lesser prairie chicken. / USFWS

SAFE projects in each of the lesser prairie chicken range states – Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico – have targeted 147,600 acres into the occupied and potential range of the species.

The lesser prairie chicken is a Candidate species for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, and the Fish and Wildlife Service is in the process of developing a proposed listing rule. Lesser prairie-chickens need large tracts of relatively intact native grasslands to thrive, making the collaboration of many conservation partners critical to the conservation of the species.

The lesser prairie chicken SAFE projects build on the successes and lessons-learned of 25 years of CRP enrollments in the region. These SAFE projects are the result of partnerships with state wildlife agencies, conservation organizations, joint ventures, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Below: Acres allocated to projects specifically targeting priority prairie grouse and prairie grouse SAFE acres enrolled. Acres may be counted more than once for projects targeting multiple prairie grouse.

Priority Prairie Grouse	SAFE Acres Allocated	Enrolled Acres
Sage-grouse	95,422.0	54,468.1 (57.1%)
Lesser Prairie Chicken	147,600.0	95,866.2 (65.0%)
Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse	187,222.0	101,073.3 (54.0%)

Projects focus on establishing new, high quality native grasslands or enhancing the quality of existing CRP stands to meet the needs of lesser prairie chickens. The loss of habitat provided by CRP is a major threat to the continued recovery of lesser prairie chickens, and SAFE projects have been an important tool for conserving key habitats.

The greatest CRP success for lesser prairie chickens has been in Kansas, where early CRP plantings were predominated by high quality native grass stands. Just prior to CRP, lesser prairie chickens had all but disappeared from areas north of the Arkansas River in west-central Kansas and parts of southwest Kansas. However, by the late 1990's biologists from the Kansas Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism Department began to see re-colonization, sometimes in areas where lesser prairie chickens hadn't been seen for over 60 years.⁴

