

# Cover crops can help improve soil health

By Robert C. Schiffner

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Cover crops are the latest buzzword for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, from the chief of the agency all the way down to the field office.

Many farmers have begun to adopt cover crops into their cropping rotations. They can improve soil health by helping to develop an environment that sustains and nourishes plants, soil microbes and beneficial insects.

Healthy soil can increase crop production, increase profits, reduce costs and protect natural resources such as soil, air and water. Adopting a soil health management system can increase organic matter, increase soil organisms, reduce soil compaction and improve nutrient storage and cycling.

Plus, healthy soils absorb and retain more water, making them less susceptible to runoff and erosion. This means more water will be available for crops when they need it.

Soil health management systems im-

prove soil conditions, allowing farmers to spend less money on fuel and energy while benefiting from higher crop yields. Managing for soil health is one of the easiest and most effective ways for farmers to increase crop productivity and profitability while improving the environment.

The service is working on a national effort to educate itself, customers and the public about the positive impacts soil health management systems can have on both productivity and conservation. Field offices have tools available that will assist participants with evaluating cover crop mixes and help them come up with a mix that will focus on the needs of the soil.

For information on cover crops and their benefits to soil health, contact your local service office or conservation district office located at your local county USDA Service Center (listed in the telephone book under United States Government or on the Internet at [offices.usda.gov](http://offices.usda.gov)).

Information is available on the Kansas Web site at [www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov).

# Prairie chickens drawing attention

By Roger Tacha

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OAKLEY – Okay, which? Should it be one or the other? Cattle with prairie chickens, or “chickens” with cattle? Read on, then *you* decide.

There are two species of prairie chickens in Kansas. Greater prairie chickens inhabit certain grasslands in most of the state, except southwest Kansas. Lesser prairie chickens occur mainly in suitable rangelands in west-central and southwest Kansas. Both birds were native species of the plains long before settlement – and they are still “hanging on.”

Both greater and lesser “chickens” have recently drawn a lot of attention from a wide audience ranging from wildlife biologists, to legislators, to ranchers, to federal and state conservation agencies, to researchers, to non-governmental conservation groups. This is due primarily to the fact that prairie chicken populations are declining in most places.

There are some activities that could even lead to the lesser prairie-chicken being listed as a Threatened and Endangered Species because of all this.

Greater and lesser prairie-chickens, in general, require similar kinds of grassland habitats, whether it is native range, or planted – such as acres in the Conservation Reserve Program. That said, the most obvious detriment to the prairie chicken is the conversion of these lands to cropland. This is mostly economically driven and unlikely to reverse itself for the benefit of the prairie chicken alone.

But what is positive for prairie chickens is the fact that there is still significant grassland acreage, and it can be managed for the improvement of both livestock forage and prairie chickens – at the same time.

Many producers and ranchers are already doing high-level range management that improves or maintains their range plants, which in turn improves livestock performance

and health – which also provides prairie chicken habitats. Their land is where most of the remaining prairie chickens are.

These “pastures” are generally being grazed with stocking rates that match what the land can realistically handle. They are following a plan for rest-rotation grazing or partial-season grazing. The fields with best nesting cover are usually grazed after the bird-nesting period. In grazing systems with less than four pastures, livestock are usually cycled through the fields only once.

Winter grazing is closely regulated and usually confined to fields dedicated to winter use only. Prescribed burning is often needed for brush control and improving plant vigor. In the case of brush management, fire is used timely and periodically, and only on portions of the range at a time.

Whether or not any of these range managers are doing all this management for prairie chickens is probably irrelevant, secondary at best. There are many proven indicators of rangeland health – most are based on plant and soil properties. But the presence or possibility of presence, of prairie chickens living in a pasture might be the grand prize indicator of a rancher’s management perfection.

Are prairie chickens there, or not? Would they like what they see when they find it?

It probably does not matter whether the range is grazed just to benefit prairie chickens, or whether chickens are there because the producer’s livestock and plants are doing well. If prairie chickens are, or could be there, then plant and wildlife resources *are* good.

If prairie chickens are not there, can the range logically be changed so they *could* be there? The answer is often, yes!

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Service offers technical and financial assistance to producers for addressing prairie chicken habitat needs through certain range management practices. Your local service office can get those questions answered and issues defined for you. Stop in.

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