



The Mackey family partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove eastern red cedar and restore prairie habitat on their Oklahoma ranch.



A rural road may serve as a firebreak and, later, as a place to observe the difference between burned and unburned grassland habitat.

Partnering for Prairie Chickens

U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
WORKS WITH RANCHERS
TO RESTORE OKLAHOMA RANGELAND

*Story & Photos by
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On an unusually cool August morning, rancher Mike Mackey scans the horizon, surveying the beauty of the gently waving grass covering the rolling silhouettes of the sand sage hills on his family's ranch in northwest Oklahoma. Until a year ago, the rise and fall of the prairie was almost completely obscured from view by the invasion of eastern red cedar trees. On the Mackey ranch, cedar trees eliminated not just the view, but also the soil moisture, the ability to see and work cattle, and equally important, it eliminated suitable habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken.

When the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service approached the Mackeys to partner with them financially to cut the cedars and follow with prescribed fire, they were definitely interested. Mike and his father, Lee, are fourth generation stewards of the prairie ranch, so they undertook their restoration project with a strong sense of obligation to conserve both the grazing productivity and natural resources the ranch provides.

The financial incentive was also enticing. Through the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, ranchers who have prairie chickens on their property, or are in proximity to recovery

zones, may receive up to 90 percent cost share to implement conservation practices that restore expansive prairie habitat. At first, some ranchers are unsure about cutting trees in their uplands. Biologists show them historic, black and white photographs of the formerly treeless prairie, which usually convinces them that tree removal is good for the land.

The Red Hills of Kansas and Oklahoma comprise one of the largest intact parcels of mixed grass prairie in the southern plains of North America. It's no surprise that this landscape remains one of the last strongholds for the lesser prairie-chicken. The region's dissected topography and bright red soil led to its name, the Red Hills. While the rugged topography protected the Red Hills from farming, it also made the habitat vulnerable to encroachment by woody species. Some landowners are reluctant to conduct prescribed burns to control woody invasion because of possible risk of a fire getting out of control. However, with eastern red cedar encroaching at an estimated rate of over 800 acres per day in Oklahoma, area ranchers now say, "We can't afford NOT to burn."

For more information on how you or your NAGP chapter can restore habitat with funds from the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, contact the nearest USFWS office or National Wildlife Refuge in your state, or go to: www.fws.gov.