

## In Missouri, prairie chicken push could pay off for farmers

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**ST. LOUIS** • Farmland owners in certain Missouri counties can give prairie chickens a boost and earn income in an unsettling economy.

A new state-federal program will pay them to set aside land as habitat and nesting grounds for prairie chickens, which once roamed the state's prairies in the hundreds of thousands.

With fewer than 400 to 500 birds remaining in Missouri, their existence is tenuous.

"They're part of our prairie heritage," said Max Alleger, the state's prairie chicken recovery leader with the Missouri Department of Conservation. "They represent the native prairie that once covered a third of Missouri."

Prairie chickens, historic residents of Missouri grasslands, are being managed for expansion in parts of the state. But their need for safe nesting sites and room to roam led to a joint effort by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Missouri Department of Conservation to create new habitat from cropland.

A long-standing USDA program that pays farmers not to plant crops on lands that are highly erodible or that could serve as a buffer for streams or as wildlife habitat now includes prairie chicken restoration efforts as a goal in Missouri and elsewhere.

The government payments, over a 15-year contract, would come just as farmers struggle to get operating loans for next spring's planting, said Joe Horner, a University of Missouri Extension economist.

The program is limited to specific areas in 11 Missouri counties where prairie chickens are being encouraged: Adair, Benton, Barton, Dade, Harrison, Jasper, Lawrence, Pettis, St. Clair, Sullivan and Vernon.

Farmland owners must pledge a minimum of 20 well-drained, upland acres that provide an open landscape. Some help may be available to remove trees more than 10 feet tall. Payments are calculated on a formula crafted by the USDA's Farm Service Agency.

Iowa, New Mexico, and Texas are among the states making similar offers to their farmers to reverse the decline in prairie chicken habitat, according to the Farm Service Agency.

It comes through a 2007 program known as SAFE, or state acres for wildlife enhancement.

Signups are through local USDA Farm Service Agency offices.