

Going to the Dogs



Western states are trying to develop a strategy for implementing prairie dog conservation and management at the state level.

by **Troy Smith**

In 11 Western states, folks are fussing over plans to protect prairie dogs. More specifically, they're concerned with the black-tailed prairie dog, one of five similar burrowing rodent species inhabiting the plains and plateaus of North America.

Some wildlife advocacy groups and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) favor measures to conserve and manage black-tailed prairie dog habitat throughout its historical range — an irregular corridor stretching from the northern Great Plains into the Southwest. Protection proponents fear total numbers of that particular prairie dog are in decline.

But in cow country, the critter has a sorry reputation. Often considered a pest of the plains, many landowners try hard to keep prairie dog numbers in check by shooting or poisoning them. Most Western states have, or have had, programs designed to assist with control. Some landowners say that, despite their efforts, the rodents appear to thrive. To them, preservation of prairie dogs is an unnecessary notion.

Dog towns

Prairie dogs are highly social and live in colonies or towns that may cover only a few acres of ground or hundreds of acres with thousands of the rodents in residence. A town's numerous burrows pose a danger to livestock injured by stepping into the holes, and prairie dogs compete with grazing animals for forage.

However, cattlemen blame

them most for degrading range condition. Vigilance is the animals' only defense against predators, so prairie dogs maintain a wide range of sight by keeping vegetation cropped close to the ground. Ranchers contend the constant pressure causes desirable forage species to decline, leaving sparse ground cover consisting predominantly of weeds.

The FWS estimates the U.S.

population of black-tailed prairie dogs at several million animals occupying approximately 676,000 acres. It is the contention of some wildlife interests, however, that those numbers represent mere remnants of historical population and range of habitat.

Protection

In 1998, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) headed a list of entities that petitioned the FWS to list the black-tailed prairie dog as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Petitioners contend historical populations in the 11-state area had been reduced by 99%.

In response, the FWS determined that the species is a candidate for "threatened" status and issued a "warranted but precluded" designation. Put simply, the agency agreed that the prairie dog warranted listing, but other species held higher priority. The FWS plans to review the situation annually.

If the animals' status doesn't improve or if it worsens, the

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PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

► Prairie dogs maintain a wide range of sight by keeping vegetation cropped close to the ground. Rancher John McFadden shows how constant pressure causes desirable forage species to decline, leaving sparse ground cover consisting predominantly of weeds.

► Above: Prairie dogs are highly social and live in colonies or towns that may cover only a few acres of ground or hundreds of acres with thousands of the rodents in residence. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA SCHOOL OF NATURAL RESOURCE SCIENCES

FWS could list the species as threatened, restrict control activities, and require increases in the prairie dog population and expansion of its habitat.

Options

Bob Luce of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department hopes listing the prairie dog as a threatened species can be prevented. He is coordinator for the Interstate Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Team, which includes representatives of wildlife agencies from the 11 affected states. The conservation team was formed to develop a strategy for implementing prairie dog conservation and management at the state level. Luce believes a coordinated effort could demonstrate to the FWS that the conservation needs of the species are being addressed and that listing is not needed.

“We’ve attempted to establish standards and reasonable goals for states to adopt in their state conservation and management plans. But we believe an umbrella, multistate approach

will be more effective in providing long-term management of the black-tailed prairie dog than would federal listing or disparate state planning efforts,” Luce says.

If accepted by the FWS as the best approach, from a biological and scientific standpoint, implementation of the 11 state management plans could remove the need for listing the species under the ESA, and it eventually could result in its removal from the candidate list, Luce adds.

The goals

The conservation team encouraged individual state prairie dog conservation task forces to develop plans for their contribution to a primary objective of establishing 1.9 million acres, or more, of prairie dog acreage in the United States during the next 10 years. There are three secondary 10-year targets:

- (1) Maintaining a minimum

of 11 complexes (colonies located in relatively close proximity) of more than 5,000 acres each, with one such complex located in each state;

- (2) Managing at least 10% of total occupied acreage in colonies or complexes greater than 1,000 acres; and
- (3) Maintaining distribution of prairie dogs over at least 75% of the counties in the species’s historical range, or at least 75% of the historical geographic distribution.

While public lands, including those managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), would be included, voluntary cooperation from private landowners would be needed to meet acreage objectives. The conservation team proposed establishment of incentive programs to encourage landowners to maintain colonies on portions of

their private properties. Luce says incentive payments could be used to purchase perpetual easements or to provide annual lease payments on enrolled lands.

Individual state wildlife agencies would have regulatory authority to maintain the objectives of state conservation plans. Options include limiting or prohibiting the shooting or poisoning of prairie dogs.

Luce says each state would seek a candidate conservation agreement with assurances (CCAA) for the black-tailed prairie dog. He says such an agreement with the FWS secures the agency’s promise not to invoke federal regulatory authority in a state that has implemented an approved conservation plan, even if the species is eventually listed under the ESA.

A CCAA is meant to benefit landowners, Luce affirms. It’s their guarantee that regulatory authorities won’t change horses midstream.

State response

Most states have initiated development of their conservation plans. Some have released drafts for public comment, prompting considerable criticism from cattlemen. In Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota — states said to contain 36% of the prairie dogs’ historical range — a commonly asked question is, “Why are we doing this?”

Ken Blunt is wondering, despite the fact that he is a member of the working group charged with fashioning a conservation plan for Montana. The Malta-area rancher says prairie dog towns of up to 400 acres are common in his state. A 20,000-acre complex encompasses the south side of his home county.

“Where is the decline that [the FWS] talks about? And decline from what? The 65-million-acre historical range they talk about is an estimate based on the journals of Lewis and Clark and



old fur trappers' tales," Blunt states. "Prairie dogs have been on the increase in Montana since the 1930s. I think we already have more prairie dog acreage than our goal calls for."

The conservation team has estimated the state's current acreage at 90,000 and has recommended a 10-year objective of more than 302,000 acres. However, Blunt says, Montana planners want only a modest increase or, better still, to hold the line at the current acreage.

"A lot of landowners are willing to participate in conservation efforts, or are resigned to it, but let's do it at a reasonable level," Blunt says. "Let's just live with the prairie dogs we've got."

Arizona

At a glance, Arizona's target seems reasonable. To do its part to meet objectives for the multistate approach, the state

would have to manage about 7,000 acres of habitat for black-tailed prairie dogs.

"But we don't have any of that particular species," says Doc Lane, director of natural resources for the Arizona Cattlemen's Association. "[The FWS] says the southeastern corner of Arizona is part of the historical range. If so, there haven't been any here for a very long time. I suppose they'll want to relocate some prairie dogs here, but we've already got more problems with the Endangered Species Act than you can shake a club at. I'm not sure we need another one."

Although nearly 50% of Arizona is in federal hands, much of that public land is unsuitable habitat for prairie dogs. Lane fears the burden will weigh heavily on owners of private lands.

Nebraska

Nebraska has little public

land, so plenty of willing landowners will be needed to help meet the goal of protecting nearly 150,000 acres of prairie dog habitat. Rancher response to the plan during public comment sessions was overwhelmingly critical.

Troy Bredenkamp, vice president of technical services for Nebraska Cattlemen Inc. (NC), believes the primary issue is the numbers. Some states have conducted surveys to determine prairie dog populations and acreage, but Nebraska has not. Bredenkamp says the cattlemen he represents have three main concerns:

- (1) Using numerical goals without knowing how many prairie dogs or habitat acres actually exist;
- (2) Moving ahead with a plan that is highly dependent on incentive funding for producers when costs of the program have not been estimated accurately and a

source of funding has not been identified; and
(3) Giving the state wildlife agency authority to impose regulatory options if the numerical objectives of the plan are not met.

"The plan suggests our state enter a race with the federal government, and we're required to build a vehicle without a blueprint," Bredenkamp adds. "This vehicle is supposed to be pushed by agricultural landowners who provide the engine in return for incentives. But what are the incentives, and where will they come from?"

The one thing on which both sides of the prairie dog conservation issue can agree is that the FWS is waving a stick over their heads. Proponents favor implementation of state plans to ward off federal action. Plenty of landowners are wondering which is more troublesome. 