



REPORT FROM THE BURROW Forecast of the Prairie Dog AT A GLANCE

WILDEARTH GUARDIANS annually releases the *Report from the Burrow* on “Prairie Dog Day” – Groundhog Day for the West. While Punxsutawney Phil may predict the length of winter each February 2nd, prairie dogs foretell the future of the unique landscapes they create and sustain. *Report from the Burrow* summarizes federal and state efforts to conserve prairie dogs and their habitat, and grades agencies on their performance.

Unique to North America, the five prairie dog species are a vital part of our natural heritage. As a keystone species, they create habitat for a myriad of other animals and ensure the health of western grasslands. Collectively, prairie dogs have lost between 93-99 percent of their historic range. For the full report, please visit our website at www.wildearthguardians.org.

THE REPORT CARD

D- U.S. Bureau of Land Management

The BLM administers oil and gas leasing on most federal lands and some state and private lands. The agency has dismissed protests over leasing in white-tailed prairie dog habitat, black-tailed prairie dog habitat, and potential black-footed ferret reintroduction sites. Recent management plans do not adequately protect large, biologically important white-tailed prairie dog colonies from oil and gas drilling.

F U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

In July 2011, a Washington, D.C. District Court ruled that EPA violated the Endangered Species Act by not consulting with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the potential impacts of Rozol prairie dog poison on “threatened” and “endangered” species before registering it in May 2009. The final order in the case bars the use of Rozol in Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, and South Dakota (which did not have Special Local Needs registration), pending consultation to reduce the threat to listed species.

B U.S. National Park Service

NPS manages mostly small colonies at 21 national parks, monuments, and other NPS units. NPS prairie dog management straddles the line between NPS’s policy of conserving native wildlife vs. the need to appear as a “good neighbor” to other landowners and to protect other park resources and visitor health and safety. Some units are preparing or have completed prairie dog management plans. NPS monitors most land units for changes and plague in prairie dog colonies, and in several units attempts to prevent plague by dusting with insecticide. Bryce Canyon National Park celebrates Utah Prairie Dog Day annually.

C U.S. Forest Service

USFS allows oil and gas drilling in some habitat and defers to state regulations regarding prairie dog shooting in most cases. USFS has amended land management plans to allow prairie dog poisoning in some areas of the Buffalo Gap, Fort Pierre, Grand River, Little Missouri, Oglala, Pawnee, and Thunder Basin National Grasslands. The agency conducts regular population surveys. USFS is undertaking active restoration in Thunder Basin, including controlled burns to encourage prairie dog expansion, dusting colonies with insecticide to prevent plague, and relocating prairie dogs away from private lands instead of poisoning.

D U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

A legal settlement in May 2011 between USFWS and WildEarth Guardians requires the agency to make final listing decisions or “not warranted” findings for 251 candidate species, including the Gunnison’s prairie dog, by the end of 2016. The settlement also required a new finding on a petition to uplist the Utah prairie dog from “threatened” to “endangered.” USFWS withdrew its appeal

of a court decision that it violated the law by finding that only Gunnison’s prairie dogs in montane habitat warranted ESA listing, excluding those in lower-elevation prairie habitat. However, USFWS again found that the species did not warrant “endangered” status. USFWS proposed to revise a special 4(d) rule that allowed trapping or shooting of up to 6,000 Utah prairie dogs. The proposed amendments would limit take of Utah prairie dogs to 10 percent of the current annual population count.

F U.S.D.A. Wildlife Services

Wildlife Services, a branch of the U.S.D.A. charged with “wildlife damage management,” releases information one year behind *Report from the Burrow*. Wildlife Services killed 20,909 prairie dogs and fumigated 30,818 burrows in 2010.

B Arizona

Black-tailed and Gunnison’s prairie dogs. The state has been working to reintroduce black-tailed prairie dogs since 2008. This work continued in 2011. Eighty prairie dogs were released into the three existing colonies in Las Cienegas. The state has a spring shooting closure but does not limit poisoning for Gunnison’s prairie dogs. The state monitors both species for plague.

C Colorado

Black-tailed, Gunnison’s, and white-tailed prairie dogs. Colorado Parks and Wildlife is taking action to manage and minimize plague events, including dusting colonies with insecticide and assisting with plague research. The state has completed several surveys for all three species. State law complicates relocation of prairie dogs by requiring the approval of the receiving county commission. Colorado has a spring seasonal shooting closure on public lands from the end of February until June 15 for all three species.

D- Kansas

Black-tailed prairie dogs. State laws give poisoning control to counties. Kansas Statute 80-1202, passed in 1901, allows counties to poison prairie dogs on private land without the owner’s permission and at their expense. Logan County, KS, has been trying to use this statute to force the extermination of prairie dogs on the Haverfield/Barnhardt/Blank Complex, the largest complex of black-tailed prairie dogs in Kansas. The Logan County Commission is appealing a state court’s denial of their plan to poison prairie dogs on the properties.

D Montana

Black-tailed and white-tailed prairie dogs. The state wildlife agency has a prairie dog conservation plan and classifies both species as “species of concern.” However, Montana’s Department of Agriculture, which designates both black- and white-tailed prairie dogs “vertebrate pests,” has more authority over prairie dog management than the wildlife agency. Shooting of both species is currently unlimited

(except in some national wildlife refuges) and a license is not required. Prairie dog poisoning is unregulated, except in the state's black-footed ferret recovery area or if the area to be treated exceeds 80 acres in size.

F Nebraska

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The Nebraska Game and Parks Board of Commissioners ordered the state's Game and Parks Department to stop all prairie dog conservation activities, including development of a conservation plan and monitoring, in 2002. The ban on research was later rescinded but the state has done little to conserve prairie dogs. Nebraska has no limits on shooting prairie dogs, except that non-residents need a license. The state senate considered a bill which would give counties the power to control prairie dogs on private or (non-federal) public land; it won first-round approval in the legislature in January 2012, passing 30-0. This bill would effectively hand over control of prairie dogs on private land to the counties.

D- New Mexico

Black-tailed and Gunnison's prairie dogs. Both prairie dog species are listed as "species of greatest conservation need" in New Mexico's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy. Shooting is banned on state trust lands but is otherwise unrestricted. The New Mexico Natural Heritage program used aerial photos from 2005 to estimate area of prairie dog disturbance over the historical range of the black-tailed prairie dog in the state. New Mexico has no permitting process for relocation of prairie dogs, which can make tracking relocation projects difficult.

F North Dakota

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department (NDGF) is in the process of surveying black-tailed prairie dog range throughout the state. Poisoning is legal on private lands and illegal on public lands, although it does occur there. Except for requiring a license for non-residents, North Dakota has no limits on shooting. NDGF provides a map of the general locations of prairie dog towns in the Hunting/Trapping section of their website.

C+ Oklahoma

Black-tailed prairie dogs. Oklahoma surveyed their prairie dog range in 2011 using state-wide aerial photos. Oklahoma is the only state that requires a permit for any prairie dog poisoning on private lands and prohibits killing of prairie dogs with explosives. Moreover, the state will not issue permits to private landowners to poison prairie dogs in counties that have fewer than 1,000 prairie dogs or less than 100 occupied acres. Landowners with 10 or more occupied acres can enroll in a Landowner Incentive Program and receive an annual incentive payment for preserving occupied acres or native rangeland adjacent to the prairie dog colony for expansion. A license is required, but shooting is unlimited on most lands. The state monitors but does not mitigate for plague.

F South Dakota

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department (SDGFP) classifies the black-tailed prairie dog as a "pest" species. SDGFP underwrites poisoning costs on private and state lands. The grant supporting incentives for protecting prairie dogs on private land in the Conata Basin recently expired and the program was canceled. South Dakota's Agriculture Department sells prairie dog poison to landowners. The South Dakota Legislature passed House Bill 1047 in February 2011, which lifted the spring shooting closure on most public lands (the black-footed ferret management area in Conata Basin is closed year round).

D+ Texas

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The state resurveyed priority areas identified in the Texas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Management Plan in 2011. Texas allows unlimited prairie dog shooting with a license. The state allows live-collecting of less than 25 without a permit; capture and holding of more than 25 with a non-game permit; and capture and selling with a non-game commercial dealer's permit. The state has formed a Texas Black-footed Ferret Working Group to assess the feasibility of reintroducing black-footed ferrets.

C Utah

Gunnison's, Utah, and white-tailed prairie dogs. Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) reported a spring count of 6,661 adult Utah prairie dogs during its annual trend count. Approximately 1,250 Utah prairie dogs were translocated to six sites on protected land in 2011. Utah is launching a habitat credit exchange program aimed at preserving Utah prairie dog habitat on private lands. Utah Senators Orrin Hatch and Mike Lee introduced a bill (S. 1580) that would exempt Utah prairie dogs within the boundaries of the Parowan City Airport and the Paragonah cemetery from the protection of the ESA. Utah bans shooting of Gunnison's and white-tailed prairie dogs on public lands from April 1 – June 15. The state undertook occupancy surveys for both Gunnison's and white-tailed prairie dogs as part of a range-wide modeling effort.

D- Wyoming

Black-tailed and white-tailed prairie dogs. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) removed both species of prairie dog in the state from the list of "species of greatest conservation need," effectively eliminating state funding for prairie dog surveys and conservation. Both white- and black-tailed prairie dogs are designated as a "non-game species of special concern" by WGFD and a "pest" by the state's agriculture department. Wyoming has no limits on shooting. The state does not monitor or mitigate for plague. Wyoming law puts prairie dog poisoning in county hands. This year, Wyoming approved prairie dog relocation into Thunder Basin National Grassland and the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission approved a translocation policy for the entire state.

