

## Dogged by uncertainty

T.S. Last / Journal North



A prairie dog pops up from its burrow near the intersection of Cerrillos Road and St. Francis Drive.

The city's agreement to relocate such rodents to Bureau of Land Management sites near El Malpais has expired. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Santa Fe prairie dogs that are considered troublesome or in the path of new development currently have nowhere else to go.

In past years, the city has relocated such critters to three sites spread across seven miles of the El Malpais National Conservation Area south of Grants, where the Bureau of Land Management and others have been working to re-establish depleted native colonies.

But the city's agreement with the BLM allowing the relocation, in effect since 2008, expired in January.

“Until we have a confirmed and approved relocation site, we won’t be directing our contractor to catch them and relocate them,” said Ben Gurule, director of Santa Fe’s parks division. The issue has been moot until now, because prairie dog relocations, tied to the animals’ life cycle, only occur in the months of April and June-September.

The BLM is trying to determine the success of the program at the El Malpais sites, counting the critters and collecting ecological information to see if the colonies are taking hold, according to Allison Sandoval, a public affairs specialist with the BLM’s state office.

Sandoval couldn’t say when the survey would be completed or how it might influence renewal of the agreement with the City of Santa Fe. She added that the BLM’s Rio Puerco field office, which oversees El Malpais, is working on a resource management plan that also would address the prairie dog relocations.

Gurule said prairie dogs have been an ongoing issue in Santa Fe. The city isn’t trying to eliminate them, but to keep them out of areas where they can be a problem.

“We have prairie dogs that encroach onto sports fields and those are areas we like to keep free,” he said.

Prairie dog burrows create hazards for people playing sports, and for children playing in city parks and on school grounds. The animals also may be harassed by kids and dogs who chase them and disturb their homes.

Last year, more than 300 prairie dogs were rounded up from city or school property, including Larragoite, Villa Linda and Franklin Miles parks. Some colonies, such as one at Frenchy’s Field, that don’t create much of a nuisance are generally left undisturbed.

Gurule said he’s hopeful something can be worked out to relocate the prairie dogs, whether it’s at El Malpais or elsewhere.

“It’s not the end of the road,” he said. “We’re in the process of working with BLM to relocate them to other sites and we already have some feelers out for other options. But without a place to take them to, we won’t have our contractor go out to capture them.”

Trent Botkin operates Eco Solutions, the contractor that has been working with the city and public schools for the past several years to remove prairie dogs.



A prairie dog stands alongside the railroad tracks and inspects passing traffic near the intersection of St. Francis Drive and Cerrillos Road. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

He, too, is optimistic that something can be worked out soon. Under his contract with the city, he may start capturing the prairie dogs on Tuesday.

“We’re pretty much under the gun here, but we’ve made it work in the past,” he said.

Botkin said he’s been looking for other places to take the critters.

“Right now, I’m in discussions with U.S. Fish and Wildlife and with private property owners. Or maybe something will come up out of the blue,” he said. “I’m optimistic we’ll get this going pretty soon – either one of our resources will pan out or someone else will come forward with a solution.”

If he can’t start collecting prairie dogs in April, Botkin said he felt confident that he could by June 15.

There’s a break in the established window to capture the rodents so as to not interrupt their breeding season. He can capture again from June 15 to Sept. 15.

Meanwhile, the conservation group WildEarth Guardians has petitioned BLM to ban the shooting of prairie dogs at the sites in El Malpais where they have been relocated. BLM spokeswoman Sandoval said she didn’t know of any prairie dogs that had been shot there.

Taylor Jones, an endangered species advocate for WildEarth Guardians, said the BLM has yet to respond to the petition, which was issued in September 2012.

“These things often take a really long time,” she said.

Jones said WildEarth Guardians supports the city’s efforts to find relocation sites consistent with prairie dogs’ natural environment. The group just doesn’t want them to be put someplace where they become easy targets for hunters.

“Ideally, we’d like to see more areas where prairie dogs are completely protected,” she said. “We really like the ordinance that Santa Fe has in place to relocate them, rather than killing them. So we’re supportive of that. We want the same thing.”

Animal Protection of New Mexico worked in concert with WildEarth Guardians in petitioning the BLM for a shooting ban at El Malpais.

Phil Carter, wildlife campaign manager for APNM, said the city’s agreement with BLM to relocate the prairie dogs was a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done.

“I hope the city of Santa Fe will take a long hard look at protections,” he said. “Out of sight, out of mind is not the end of it. I hope the city realizes that it has to do better for these animals, assuring that they thrive.”

Carter said the city’s prairie dog relocation program, which has been in place since 2001, has always lacked accountability.

“To my knowledge, BLM hasn’t done any follow-up. Not to do any follow-up and casting them out with no protection is really failing the process,” he said.

In the meantime, the city is holding out hope it will soon have a place for its prairie dogs to go.

“It’s more of trying to keep up with it, instead of finding ourselves behind the eight ball,” Gurule said.