

WILDLIFE

Western states must better protect prairie dogs — report

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Prairie dogs at Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Rich Keen, courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Ongoing efforts by Western states to save prairie dogs are too weak and inconsistent to adequately protect the keystone species and their grassland habitat, according to a new report by an environmental group.

But the 10th annual "[Report from the Burrow](#)," released today by WildEarth Guardians, acknowledges that some states within the prairie dog's 12-state range, like Arizona, "are actively working to enhance black-tailed prairie dog populations through relocation, plague prevention and management, and education."

They're just not making enough progress, according to the 21-page report.

Arizona, for example, is one of 11 states that committed in a 2003 multistate conservation plan to minimum occupied prairie dog acreage. Kansas, South Dakota and Wyoming have met the goals of the state plans. Arizona's goal was to have 7,100 acres of occupied prairie dog habitat by 2011, including 1,000 acres on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Recent surveys indicate there's only about 18.5 acres of occupied prairie dog habitat in the state, the report says.

What's more, some states like Colorado have conflicting policies regarding prairie dogs.

For example, under the state's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, all prairie dog species are listed as "species of greatest conservation need," according to the report. But the Colorado Department of Agriculture designates prairie dogs as "destructive rodent pests," which the report says limits the ability of state officials to relocate prairie dogs to better habitat across county lines.

"Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming all have Department of Agriculture regulations defining prairie dogs as 'pests,' which complicates their management by state wildlife agencies as species of concern and undermines conservation efforts," the report says.

Overall, state efforts to save the four species of prairie dogs — the black-tailed, white-tailed, Gunnison's and Utah — across their range, extending from south-central Texas as far north as Montana, have been mixed at best.

That doesn't bode well for prairie dogs, which are considered keystone species, supporting entire ecosystems by fertilizing and aerating the soil, reducing noxious weeds and clipping the top parts of forage, creating a shorter but more nutrient-rich blade of grass.

Elk and bison graze over prairie dog towns, and prairie dogs are an important food source for a wide variety of sensitive species, including hawks, eagles, coyotes, foxes and badgers.

"Protecting and restoring prairie dog communities is essential to protecting and restoring grassland ecosystems, and requires commitment from our government agencies at all levels," said Taylor Jones, WildEarth Guardians' endangered species advocate. "Unfortunately, old prejudices about prairie dogs often outweigh their importance when management decisions are made."

The report encourages states to double down on efforts to protect prairie dogs.

"All states in prairie dog range should continue working to educate the public about the positive aspects of prairie dogs," the report concludes. "Through a combination of education, regulatory changes, plague management, and restoration, we can ensure this rich ecosystem is preserved for future generations."