



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

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. The annual Report from the Burrow is WILDEARTH GUARDIANS' effort to evaluate progress toward recovery of prairie dog populations.

The report card is released in conjunction with Prairie Dog Day, our western celebration of Groundhog Day.

Unique to North America, the 5 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% of their historic range. This report assigns a letter grade to each state and federal agency responsible for prairie dog conservation. Grading is based on the most accurate and current scientific and government data available. We use the standard grading scale.

THE REPORT CARD

D- U.S. Bureau of Land Management

The Bureau controls the oil and gas leasing program for most federal lands and some state and private lands. This year the agency dismissed protests over the leasing of white-tailed prairie dog habitat, black-tailed prairie dog habitat, and potential black-footed ferret reintroduction sites for oil and gas drilling. Recent Resource 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 (EPA)

In May of 2009, the EPA approved the use of Rozol to exterminate black-tailed prairie dogs in all 11 states within the species' range in violation of several environmental protection laws. In September 2010, EPA made a "likely to adversely affect" finding for a number of endangered and threatened species in regards to Rozol. However, the agency did not suspend the use of Rozol, and the lawsuit remains active.

F Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

In response to the Hudson River airplane crash in New York City, caused by a collision with migratory Canada geese, the FAA went on the offensive against prairie dogs. As a result of FAA's no-prairie-dog edict, prairie dogs have been killed at airports in Albuquerque (NM), Santa Fe (NM), Flagstaff (AZ), Telluride (CO), Longmont (CO), and likely many other locations, despite years of hard work by cities and relocators to implement non-lethal management.

C- U.S. Forest Service (FS)

The FS allows oil and gas drilling in some areas and defers to state regulations regarding prairie dog shooting in most cases. The FS has amended land management plans to allow prairie dog poisoning on the Buffalo Gap, Fort Pierre, Grand River, Little Missouri, Oglala, Pawnee, and Thunder Basin National Grasslands. The agency raised its grade this year by mitigating plague in key black-footed ferret recovery areas and requiring 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 (FWS)

In June, FWS found listing of the white-tailed prairie dog "not warranted." In September, a court struck down their 2007 decision not to upgrade the Utah prairie dog from threatened to endangered. In September, a federal court ruled that the Interior Secretary violated the law by finding only those Gunnison's prairie dogs located in montane habitat warranted for ESA listing and those in lower-elevation prairie habitat not warranted. FWS must revisit the finding. In August FWS released a draft revised recovery plan for the Utah prairie dog.

B U.S. National Park Service (NPS)

The NPS manages mostly small colonies at National Parks, Monuments, and other NPS lands. Several NPS units have management plans. Lethal control is allowed in some units. The NPS monitors most land units for prairie dog colony changes and plague. The agency tries to prevent plague by dusting with insecticide to kill fleas at several locations. The NPS celebrated Utah Prairie Dog Day at Bryce Canyon National Park for the first time in 2010.

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. In 2009, they killed 12,698 prairie dogs and fumigated 13,877 burrows.

B Arizona

Black-tailed and Gunnison's prairie dogs. Arizona continued their reintroduction work in 2010, releasing 119 more black-tailed prairie dogs into a new area in Las Cienegas. The state has a spring shooting closure but does not limit poisoning for Gunnison's prairie dogs.

C- Colorado

Black-tailed, Gunnison's, and white-tailed prairie dogs. Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) issued a final management plan for two species, the *Gunnison's and White-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Strategy*, in July 2010. CDOW's implementation of the aerial survey method for black-tailed prairie dogs has been criticized by scientists concerned that it may overestimate acreage. CDOW has not cooperated with outside entities in addressing criticisms of their monitoring method. State law SB 99-111 continues to inhibit relocation of prairie dogs. 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. A judge denied the county's suit to poison prairie dogs on the properties. Both residents and non-residents need a license to shoot prairie dogs. The state wildlife agency supported the September relocation of 189 imperiled prairie dogs into a private conservation area in southern Kansas.

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 MFWP. In 2010 an attempted relocation of white-tailed prairie dogs failed due to bad weather. 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 black-footed ferret recovery areas 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 so far has done little to conserve prairie dogs. Nebraska has no limits on shooting prairie dogs, except that non-residents need a license. The state’s wildlife agency initially rejected a proposal to reintroduce prairie dogs to 40 acres of a private nature sanctuary. But in a heartening development, after further negotiations the agency decided to allow the reintroduction. We hope to see further actions of this sort and maybe even a raise in Nebraska’s grade next year.

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. The state released a draft conservation plan for the Gunnison’s prairie dog in 2008, but it has not yet been finalized. Shooting is banned on state trust lands but is otherwise unrestricted. The state has an incentive program for landowners to protect prairie dogs, but no landowners have enrolled.

F North Dakota

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The state’s prairie dog management plan lists maintaining a viable population in the state as its goal, but that number may fall well below the amount needed to sustain prairie dog-dependent species. Poisoning is legal on private lands and illegal on public lands, although it does occur there. Except for requiring non-residents to obtain a license, North Dakota has no limits on prairie dog shooting. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department provides a map of prairie dog town locations to hunters on their website.

C+ Oklahoma

Black-tailed prairie dogs. Oklahoma is adopting a new survey methodology using state-wide aerial photos. The state does not issue poisoning permits to private landowners in counties that have less than 1,000 prairie dogs or 100 occupied acres. 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. The ODWC pays landowners \$10 an acre not to poison prairie dogs. The Department also pays landowners who allow prairie dogs to expand on their lands \$10 per expansion acre. A license is required, but shooting is unlimited on most lands. The state monitors but does not mitigate for plague.

D- 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. The SDGFP underwrites poisoning costs on private and state lands. The South Dakota Supreme Court recently ruled that the state is obligated to control prairie dogs that migrate from public to private land, and landowners may be eligible for monetary recovery of damages. The ruling is harmful to prairie dog conservation prospects. There is a spring shooting closure on public lands, but representatives recently introduced House Bill 1047, which if enacted would end the shooting closure.

D+ Texas

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The state began a survey of priority areas identified in the Texas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Management Plan in 2010 and plans to complete it in the spring of 2011. Texas allows unlimited prairie dog shooting with a license. The state also 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 5,648 adult Utah prairie dogs during its annual trend count. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has authority over Utah prairie dog recovery efforts, because the species is federally listed as threatened. The UDWR has relocated Utah prairie dogs from private lands and the Cedar Ridge Municipal Golf Course to federal public lands. Relocation has had only mixed success. A committee headed by the governor’s office is considering ways to speed the removal of the Utah prairie dog from the Threatened list and removal of protections in Iron County where prairie dogs are threatened by development. Utah bans shooting of Gunnison’s and white-tailed prairie dogs on public lands from April 1 – June 15. The state has undertaken state-wide 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 surveyed its black-tailed prairie dog populations in 2006 and estimated 229,607 occupied acres. The department surveyed again in 2009, but the sample size selected was too small to account for the variance. Therefore the usefulness of this survey for monitoring trends is questionable. The department conducted a statewide white-tailed prairie dog aerial survey in 2008 and estimated 2,893,487 colony acres (plus or minus 520,890 acres). 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.

