

REPORT FROM THE BURROW

Forecast of the Prairie Dog

AT A GLANCE

Jess Alford



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. This first annual Report from the Burrow is WILDEARTH GUARDIANS' effort to document 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. The Mexican prairie dog of northeastern Mexico and the Utah prairie dog of southwestern Utah are listed as Endangered and Threatened, respectively, under the Endangered Species Act, and both teeter on the brink of extinction. Of the three species with no federal protection: the black-tailed prairie dog of the Great Plains has declined by 98-99%, the white-tailed prairie dog of the Sagebrush Sea has declined by 90-98%, and the Gunnison's prairie dog of the intermountain grasslands has declined by 97%.

This report assigns a letter grade to each federal agency and state responsible for ensuring prairie dogs do not disappear. Grading is based on the most accurate and current scientific and government data available. We use the standard 4-point scale.

THE REPORT CARD

D- FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Between 2003 and 2007, the Service rejected petitions to list the Gunnison's and white-tailed prairie dogs under the ESA, removed the black-tailed from the ESA Candidate list, and refused to upgrade the Utah prairie dog from Threatened to Endangered. The Service allows shooting of up to 6,000 Utah prairie dogs every year, though only 10,000 individuals remain. The Service's translocation efforts often result in survival rates of only 5-10% or less. The Service just missed being graded an F; it did acknowledge that an employee wrongfully tampered with the white-tailed prairie dog decision. Under court order, the Service will re-examine its decision on the Gunnison's prairie dog petition by February 2008. Additionally, the Service overcame significant state and local opposition to do the right thing and reintroduce black-footed ferrets onto private land in Kansas.

D- BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

The Bureau controls the oil and gas leasing program for most federal lands and some state and private lands and has leased millions of acres with active prairie dog colonies or potential habitat.

D FOREST SERVICE

The Forest Service rescinded a 2000 moratorium on poisoning black-tailed prairie dogs in 2004. Since 2004, the Nebraska National Forest and Pawnee National Grassland amended their management plans to allow poisoning. Thunder Basin and Dakota Prairie National Grasslands are developing such amendments.

C+ ARIZONA

Black-tailed prairie dogs (extinct in Arizona), Gunnison's prairie dogs. Arizona Game and Fish officials have undertaken a black-tailed prairie dog reintroduction plan. Despite a spring seasonal shooting closure for Gunnison's prairie dogs, the state reported an increase in prairie dogs shot between 2002 and 2006—at least 256,296 Gunnison's prairie dogs were shot.

D+ COLORADO

Black-tailed prairie dogs, Gunnison's prairie dogs, white-tailed prairie dogs. In 1997, the state enacted a five animal bag limit per day rule to prevent contest killings. Wildlife officials enacted a spring shooting closure on public land for all 3 species in 2006 but rescinded a total ban on black-tailed prairie dog shooting. Colorado approved poisons Rozol and Kaput-D in 2006 and 2007. In 1999, the state legislature enacted a law (SB-111) that makes relocating prairie dogs nearly impossible. State scientists claim that black-tailed prairie dog numbers keep increasing, but their rejection of offered monitoring assistance by independent scientists and long delays in releasing published data call into question the accuracy of this claim.

D- KANSAS

Black-tailed prairie dogs.

The state legislature has, thus far, failed to repeal antiquated laws from the early 1900s that mandate prairie dog poisoning at the discretion of county commissioners. Commissioners can force private landowners to eradicate prairie dogs against their will and at their personal expense. The state wildlife and agriculture departments have aided Logan County in its extermination efforts, for example, by approving Rozol. The Fish and Wildlife Service released ferrets on private land at the end of 2007 in Logan, but continued poisoning could prevent their recovery.

D+ MONTANA

Black-tailed prairie dogs, white-tailed prairie dogs.

In 2007, the Montana legislature voted down a proposal to give the Fish, Wildlife and Parks permanent authority

to manage its black- and white-tailed prairie dogs. This removed protective status for prairie dogs, nullified several shooting closures across the state, and put conservation plans on indefinite hold. Had this not occurred, Montana may have received a B.

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 developing a plan and monitoring populations. The state approved the use of Rozol, effective October 1, 2004.

D NEW MEXICO

Gunnison's prairie dogs, black-tailed prairie dogs.

Oil and gas drilling is wreaking havoc on habitat in the last remaining population strongholds, particularly on federal land, but also on private, state, and tribal lands. New Mexico does not allow shooting on state trust lands, but does not limit shooting on other lands.

D- NORTH DAKOTA

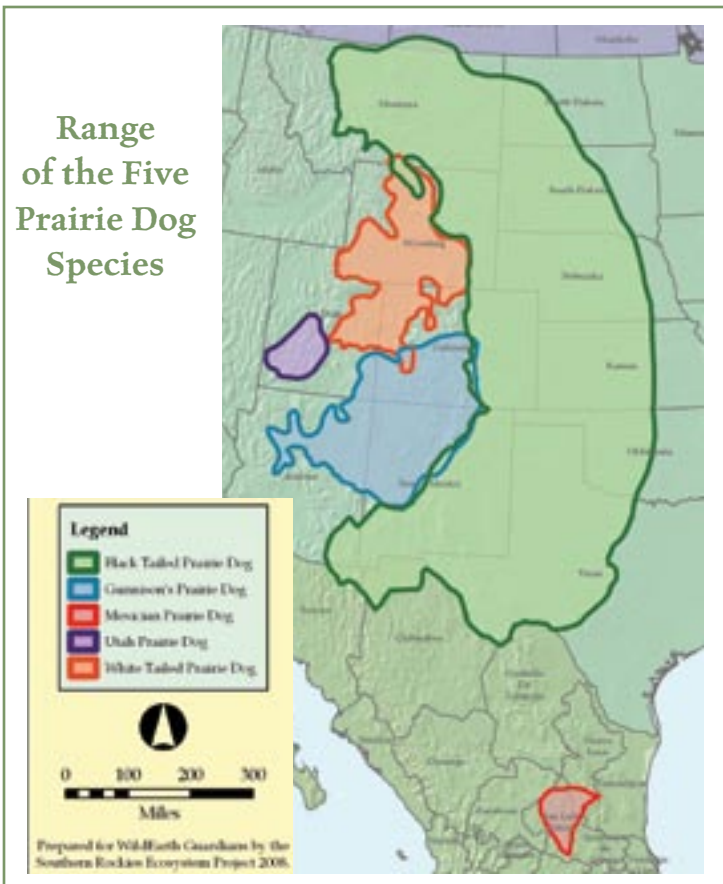
Black-tailed prairie dogs.

Significant legal and illegal poisoning occurs in the state. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department does not make prairie dog conservation a priority.

C OKLAHOMA

Black-tailed prairie dogs.

The state does not allow poisoning in counties where the total prairie dog acreage could be reduced below 1,000 acres. Oklahoma does not limit shooting.



F SOUTH DAKOTA

Black-tailed prairie dogs.

South Dakota pressured the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove black-tailed prairie dogs as an ESA Candidate species. In 2004, the Governor enacted his "emergency" prairie dog control program. The state spent taxpayer money to poison prairie dogs on private land. The state pressured the Forest Service to poison prairie dogs on the most successful black-footed ferret recovery site in existence, located in the Conata Basin on the Buffalo National Grassland.

D+ TEXAS

Black-tailed prairie dogs. The state agriculture department distributes poison and recently approved Rozol and Kaput -D for use on prairie dogs. The state enacted a ban on collecting and transporting prairie dogs as part of the pet trade in 2003.

D+ UTAH

Gunnison's prairie dogs, Utah prairie dogs, white-tailed prairie dogs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service delegates much of its authority over the Utah prairie dog to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, which fails to monitor and tolerates shooting of this listed species. The state has a spring seasonal closure on shooting Gunnison's prairie dogs but no restrictions on shooting white-tailed prairie dogs except for the Coyote Basin black-footed ferret recovery site, which is closed to shooting.

D WYOMING

Black-tailed prairie dogs, white-tailed prairie dogs.

Rampant oil and gas development is now destroying prairie dog habitat throughout the state. The state agriculture department recently approved Rozol for use on prairie dogs. The Wyoming Weed and Pest Control Act of 1973 allows counties to control prairie dogs on private land if damage has been documented to neighboring landowners.

CONCLUSION

To provide prairie dogs and their ecosystems a fighting chance at recovery and survival, prompt action is needed. We recommend the following: 1) Endangered Species Act (ESA) protection of all unlisted species of prairie dogs – the black-tailed, white-tailed, and Gunnison's. 2) Increased recovery efforts for the federally Endangered Mexican prairie dog. 3) Upgraded classification to Endangered status for the federally Threatened Utah prairie dog. 4) Prohibition on poisoning and shooting of any prairie dogs. 5) Active efforts to immunize prairie dogs against the exotic disease, sylvatic plague. 6) Prohibition on destruction of occupied prairie dog habitats on public lands. 7) Elimination of any subsidies, particularly agricultural, which contribute to destruction of prairie dog populations and habitat. 8) Any other steps necessary to protect and recover prairie dog populations and their habitat.

For more information about the grades and the state of prairie dog populations, contact Lauren McCain at lmccain@wildearthguardians.org for a copy of the full report.