



**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

# NEWS

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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An environmental assessment proposing the translocation of white-tailed prairie dogs along a stretch of Highway 72 slated for construction this summer has been released by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for public comment.

The cooperative effort between the agencies would move up to 150 white-tailed prairie dogs this summer from their current location along Highway 72 near the Wyoming border to historic but unoccupied colonies on BLM lands in Carbon County. The program could extend for five years, with as many as 300 additional white-tailed prairie dogs being translocated from Wyoming.

“This is a great opportunity to work with other stakeholders to conserve one of Montana’s most unique and seldom-seen native wildlife species,” said Allison Puchniak, native species biologist with Fish, Wildlife and Parks. “It makes sense to re-establish currently vacant colonies using prairie dogs that would otherwise be lost to the population as a result of highway reconstruction.”

Alternatives considered in the assessment are:

- A. No action.
- B. Translocation of about 150 white-tailed prairie dogs immediately at risk of loss due to Hwy 72 construction.
- C. Translocation of the 150 prairie dogs along the highway right-of-way and translocation of up to 300 additional white-tailed prairie dogs to re-establish extirpated colonies on BLM lands over a 5-year period.

Option C is the preferred alternative, and would be partially funded by Nongame Tax Checkoff dollars. “We are making efforts to keep our costs to a minimum by engaging volunteers, borrowing traps, and by working together with the BLM and Department of Transportation,” said Puchniak.

There are two species of prairie dogs in Montana, the white-tailed and the black-tailed prairie dogs. White-tailed prairie dogs differ from the very social black-tailed prairie dogs in the following ways:

- They do not alter aboveground vegetation like black-tailed prairie dogs do, making white-tailed prairie dog colonies less noticeable on the landscape.
- They spend almost half of the year under ground, hibernating four to five months in the winter and aestivating for a month or more during the hottest part of the summer.
- They are the least colonial of the prairie dog species and thus occur at a much lower density than black-tailed prairie dogs.

The white-tailed prairie dog has long been considered a “Species of Concern” in Montana and the total population has declined from 773 acres in the 1970s to 253 acres according to the most recent survey in 2005. Healthy colonies provide prey and habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including the black-footed ferret, ferruginous hawk, and golden eagles.

More information about white-tailed prairie dogs is available in FWP’s online field guide at [www.fwp.mt.gov](http://www.fwp.mt.gov).

The environmental assessment is posted at [www.fwp.mt.gov](http://www.fwp.mt.gov) under Public Notices or at [www.mt.blm.gov/bifo](http://www.mt.blm.gov/bifo). The comment period ends June 12, 2006. Comments or questions can be submitted to Allison Puchniak (FWP) at Region 5 FWP, 2300 Lake Elmo Drive, Billings, MT 59105, or [apuchniak@mt.gov](mailto:apuchniak@mt.gov); and to Jay Parks, BLM Billings Field Office, 5001 Southgate Drive, Billings, MT 59101 or [jparks@blm.gov](mailto:jparks@blm.gov). If you would like to submit your comments during a public meeting please call Jay Parks (406-896-5244) or Allison Puchniak (406-256-7800). Paper copies are available from BLM (406-896-5013) or FWP (406-247-2940).