

USDA Forest Service Update

September 2008



SUBJECT: Black-tailed Prairie Dog

SUMMARY: In 2004, acreage of black-tailed prairie dog colonies on National Forest System (NFS) lands totaled over 71,000 acres. This was a substantial increase over the nearly 48,000 acres recorded in 2002. Extended drought in much of the Great Plains had led to large expansions of prairie dog colonies, although not necessarily increases in prairie dog populations. By 2006, prairie dog colonies and populations declined significantly due to outbreaks of plague. In 2008, plague has so far affected over 9,000 colony acres in the black-footed ferret reintroduction area in Conata Basin, Buffalo Gap National Grassland. Less than 40,000 acres of prairie dog colonies now remain on Great Plains national grasslands. Nevertheless, there are requests for lethal prairie dog control on national grasslands to reduce unwanted colonization onto adjoining non-federal lands. At the same time there are growing demands for prairie dog colonies to support the recovery of the black-footed ferret, one of the world's most endangered mammals. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) decided that smaller acreages of prairie dog colonies should be tested as ferret reintroduction sites because large complexes of prairie dog colonies are difficult to find. Thus, the door is open for more national grasslands, even those with low acreages of prairie dog colonies, to participate in recovery efforts.

For NFS lands in Nebraska and much of South Dakota (Nebraska National Forest), a 2005 EIS allows lethal control of prairie dogs within .5 miles of the boundaries of national grasslands. In FY 2006, a total of over 10,000 acres of prairie dog colonies were poisoned with zinc phosphide. More pressure has been building to control interior colonies. In July 2008, the Nebraska National Forest prepared another EIS and ROD to allow the poisoning of interior colonies and to establish minimum and maximum acres of prairie dog colonies within specific units.

BACKGROUND: There currently are about 1.6 million acres of prairie dog colonies in the Great Plains. The prairie dog is a designated sensitive species and a Management Indicator Species on NFS lands, and as such, the Forest Service develops and implements appropriate management guidance and assesses the effects of all proposed activities on this species. In 2004, the USFWS concluded that listing the black-tailed prairie dog was not warranted because the threats to the species were not as once believed. However, prairie dog conservation efforts have lagged and there currently is litigation challenging federal decisions regarding several prairie dog species. The black-tailed prairie dog has been petitioned again for listing as a threatened species.

NFS lands are very important to prairie dog conservation and to other wildlife species associated with prairie dogs. Most NFS lands in the Great Plains are potential habitat for the black-tailed prairie dog. There is a great need for an increase in prairie dog colonies on federal lands. Moreover, recent experience has demonstrated the importance of plague-free prairie dog habitat to ferret recovery. Most large, active prairie dog colonies that meet these criteria are on National Grasslands, and on tribal lands in South Dakota. Recent evaluations suggest that National Grasslands in the Great Plains may be critical to achieving even a modest recovery of the black-footed ferret. The USFWS recommends black-footed ferret reintroduction trials on as little as 2,000 acres of prairie dog colonies to determine if a sustainable population could be established.

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http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/nebraska/projects/ea_and_eis/pdog/feis/index.shtml