

Bureau of Land Management Update

January 2000

SUBJECT: Multi-species Conservation for the Prairie Grasslands Ecosystem

SUMMARY: The short and mid-grass prairie ecosystem extends from Canada south to Texas and from the foothills of the eastern Rocky Mountains to the tall-grass prairie of the Great Plains. BLM manages approximately 20 million acres within this ecosystem. Concern over the condition of prairie grasslands on public land significantly increased with the recent petition to list the black-tailed prairie dog as a threatened species, and the Fish and Wildlife Service announcement that it would undertake a comprehensive status review of the species. The BLM is in the early stages of developing a multi-species conservation strategy for BLM administered lands throughout the region. The first phase of this effort will concentrate on assembling pertinent information regarding various species at risk as well as developing longer-term strategies for addressing management issues.

BACKGROUND: The short and mid-grass prairie region is biologically diverse. The dominant grass communities include native wheat grasses and needle grasses along with sod-forming gramma grasses and buffalo grass. Species richness in the region is especially high for birds, mammals, and butterflies. The World Wildlife Fund ranks the conservation status of the region 2 on a scale of one through five, with one being critically endangered and five being relatively stable, because between 50 and 95 percent of the habitats in the area has been modified, mostly due to agriculture. Grassland birds, including the Prairie Chicken and the Mountain Plover have seen steeper and more widespread declines than any other group of North American species.

Numerous native species associated with this ecosystem are in decline. Eleven species from this region have been listed as threatened or endangered by the Fish and Wildlife Service. These include, the black footed ferret, Preble's meadow jumping mouse, Piping Plover, Whooping Crane, Interior Least Tern, Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle, pallid sturgeon, American burying beetle, Ute ladies tresses, and Colorado butterfly plant. Currently, all but two of these species, Prebles's meadow jumping mouse and Colorado butterfly plant, have finalized recovery plans. With so many species of concern in this region, BLM is initiating an interagency conservation strategy for multiple species on BLM managed lands within the entire prairie region. Because BLM lands do not extend into the tall-grass prairie region, the focus of this effort will be on mid and short-grass prairie habitats.

OTHER CONSERVATION INITIATIVES

The Nature Conservancy is undertaking a national regional planning effort, and wrote a plan covering the central shortgrass prairie in 1998. It identifies species and plant communities of concern, high priority sites, conservation goals, inventory needs, strategies for conserving diversity, and some needed research. Efforts for the southern short grass prairie and the Northern Great Plains steppe are scheduled.

The Western Governor's Association sponsors the *High Plains Partnership*, which is an incentive driven, volunteer partnership between state and federal agencies and private landowners to reverse declining populations of wildlife across the region. Several state wildlife agencies are cooperating in a coordinated strategy to conserve the lesser prairie-chicken through this Initiative. In the northern shortgrass prairie, federal agencies and states are working implementing the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture project that will focus on non-wetland birds. The Northern Plains/ Prairie Pothole Regional Plan for the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan is also nearing completion and a new wetlands/ waterfowl joint venture covering the Northern Great Plains is in the early stages of development.

In addition, there are several species-specific conservation efforts underway. State wildlife agencies, federal land management agencies and American Indian tribes began working on a range-wide conservation strategy for the black-tailed prairie dog in March of 1999. The goal of the State wildlife agencies is to develop and implement state-level management plans for the black-tailed prairie dog beginning in October, 2000. The Swift fox Conservation Assessment and Strategy was recently approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

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