

BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

Extensive prairie dog habitat is found on BLM lands throughout eastern Montana. Prairie dog towns in southern Phillips County (Malta Field Office) and in southeastern Montana (Miles City Field Office) have been considered for planned black-footed ferret reintroduction efforts.

ISSUES:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined in February 2000 that the black-tailed prairie dog warranted listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but action was precluded because other species had higher priority. In August 2004, the FWS found that proposing a rule to list the black-tailed prairie dog was not warranted and the species was removed from the candidate species list. The FWS was petitioned again in July 2007 to list the black-tailed prairie dog, but due to other pending petition evaluations the petition was not evaluated until 2008. The determination is now scheduled for November 2009, which would then invoke a 60-day comment period. Listing, if determined, would occur 12 months later.

The black-footed ferret, however, lives in prairie dog towns and remains one of the most endangered mammals in North America. It was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1973. An “experimental nonessential population area” for ferrets was established in southern Phillips County, Mont., in 1994. The Malta Field Office, under the Judith–Valley–Phillips Resource Management Plan, managed prairie dog towns to provide habitat for black-footed ferrets and other associated species, and to provide opportunities for recreational wildlife viewing and prairie dog shooting. The BLM, in cooperation with other agencies, tried to maintain the abundance and distribution of prairie dog habitat on the public lands at the 1988 survey level within an area known as the 7-km Complex Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

The exotic disease sylvatic plague began to reduce the prairie dog population in July 1992; by 1996, about 80 percent of prairie dogs in Phillips County were lost. Additional plague epizootics (prairie dog die-offs) have occurred across the county as prairie dogs returned, keeping the acres of prairie dogs below the 1988 level. There now appears to be no clear break between epizootics as the disease spreads and cycles through the dog towns, making it even less likely that a sustainable population large enough for ferret reintroductions is possible in the Beauchamp Creek Reintroduction Area.

In 1988, the Malta Field Office imposed a voluntary shooting closure on 15 prairie dog towns in the Beauchamp Creek Reintroduction Area, and formally closed them to shooting in October 1999. This attempt by BLM to close areas to shooting was appealed as far as the U.S. Supreme Court, which declared it moot when the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) was legislated authority to manage prairie dog populations. The Montana Legislature in 2001 passed a law allowing FWP to manage the black-tailed prairie dog as a “species in need of management.” The 2007 legislative session, however, did not reauthorize the 2001 law, and management status for the black-tailed prairie dog ended Oct. 1, 2007. The 2009 session also did little to correct the situation. Shooting closure signs have been removed and all areas are now open to shooting. Those towns which have not felt the effects of plague outbreaks received considerable recreational shooting activity during summers of 2008 and 2009.

Region 6 of FWP completed the Prairie Dog Abundance and Distribution Objectives Plan in April 2006. Although the agency can still work to maintain prairie dog town complexes for possible ferret reintroductions, it no longer has the authority to close areas to recreational shooting. It is unlikely that the Malta Field Office will take over management of shooting closures due to its lack of authority to manage wildlife populations.

Ninety-five captive-reared black-footed ferrets were released in Beauchamp Creek during 2001 to 2004. Six confirmed litters were produced, but then plague returned in 2004 to many of the dog towns inhabited by ferrets, and animals began to disappear. The latest plague outbreak has continued into 2009. Only one ferret was found during surveys in early September 2006. The animal could not be relocated later in the month. Additional spot-lighting surveys in July 2007 and 2008 also found no ferrets. Due to the poor survival rates of released ferrets and the inability to establish a self-sustaining population on public lands in southern Phillips County, the Malta Field Office did not request additional ferrets for release in 2006 through 2009.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Conservation actions are necessary to prevent the black-tailed prairie dog and other sensitive wildlife species from being federally listed, and to assist with black-footed ferret recovery efforts. Plague, however, severely limits what can be done realistically to provide sufficient prairie dog acreage in the proper arrangement for ferret recovery efforts.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The Malta Field Office is represented on the Prairie Dog Implementation Committee (PDIC), which is an 11-member advisory group formed to assist and advise the FWP in implementing the Region 6 plan in a coordinated and biologically-based manner. The group met six times between November 2007 and February 2008 for facilitated discussions on how to implement the Region 6 plan.

The highest priority of the Region 6 plan is for FWP to establish a "Category 1" complex of prairie dog colonies, which would cover at least 5,000 acres with no more than one mile between colonies. This size is necessary for the successful reintroduction of black-footed ferrets. The plan also calls for several "Category 2" complexes of 1,000 – 5,000 acres with no more than one mile between colonies. Although not large enough for ferrets, Category 2 complexes are meant to maintain prairie dogs as well as associated species such as the mountain plover and burrowing owl.

The PDIC has recommended southern Phillips County as a suitable location for the Category 1 complex. The FWP and the PDIC are working with land owners and managers to develop concurrence on an exact location, and then the FWP will manage for establishment of a complex.

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