

## PRAIRIE DOGS

Myths, Facts, Plague, the Law  
And What We Can Do.

## Prairie Dogs

- There are five known types of prairie dogs.
- The Mexican Prairie Dog (listed as endangered and found only in Mexico)
- The Gunnison Prairie Dog (found in the four corners area)
- The Black-tail Prairie Dog (found in the short grass prairies of the West)

## Prairie Dogs (cont.)

- The White-tailed Prairie Dog (also found in the short grass prairies, but in smaller communities than the Black-tail Prairie Dog)
- The Utah Prairie Dog is smaller than the others and is threatened (found in Utah)

## What are prairie Dogs and what is their habitat?

- Prairie Dogs are burrowing rodents that are members of the squirrel family.
- Their native habitat is the short grass prairies of North America from Mexico to Canada.

## Myths vs. Truths

- Myth #1 Pre- settlement the prairie dog inhabited about 100 million hectares or 250 million acres of the short grass prairies.
- Truth. 250 million acres equal about one half the total acres of short grass prairie in the west. Except for a short time in early spring that would leave about 58 thousand AUM's to feed several million buffalo, elk and other grazers of the pre-settlement era.

## Myths vs. Truths

- Myth #2 Prairie dogs improve the range forage quality and attract grazing animals.
- Truth Prairie dogs clear the standing grasses and shrubs around their towns and can change the serial stage, but usually invasive weeds inhabit the area. Grazing animals are attracted to the area by the tender re-growth of native grasses and forbs, but unless rain is frequent only for a short time in early spring.

## Myths vs. Truths

- Myth #3 Prairie dogs do not reduce AUM's.
- Truth If prairie dogs inhabit less than 2% of the area AUM's are not reduced, but greater than 10% occupancy can greatly reduce AUM's. Most prairie dog sites tend to change over time from native grasses to invasive weeds and forbs.

## Myths vs. Truths

- Myth #3 cont.
- A count of prairie dog holes per acre in Natrona County averaged about 35 holes per acre. If one hole equals five dogs that equals a loss in that area of eight AUM's.
- 250 prairie dogs consume an AUM, that does not include forage loss to clipping.

## MYTHS vs TRUTH (cont)

- Using that information we can conservatively do the math.  
35 holes per acre X 5 prairie dogs = 175 dogs  
175 prairie dogs per acre X 35 acres (1 AUM) = 6125 prairie dogs divided by 250 = 24.5.  
If we as ranchers over grazed by 23.5 head for a couple of years imagine the consequences.  
Our range would be invasive plants and bare soil.

## MYTH vs. TRUTH

- Prairie dog infestations can reduce land value by more than 35%.
- Prairie dog infestation can reduce value of lease pasture income by 50% or more.
- Pastures that have been devastated by prairie dog colonies can take up to 20 years to return to full grazing capacity and can take many dollars in weed control and rehab work.

## Myths vs. Truths

- Myth #4 The area prairie dogs inhabited pre-settlement has been reduced by 98% or more.
- Truth. Prairie dogs likely inhabited only about 100 million acres of the short grass prairie not 250 million acres. That prairie dogs only inhabit about 2.5 million acres today is also false. Over 300 thousand acres of prairie dog towns have been GPS in three Wyoming counties and then only on private land or about 10% of the land.

## Prairie dogs and Public Health

- Seventy-six species of mammals can transmit plague. In animals it is called sylvatic plague in humans it is the bubonic plague. The plague affects wild rodents more than other animals and black-tailed prairie dogs more than any other rodents. The plague can be transmitted to humans by flea bites or direct contact with infected animals. Domestic cats seem to be the most susceptible pet.

## Prairie Dogs and Public Health

- As our urban areas grow we can expect to see more contact between prairie dogs and humans and their pets.
- When we do not control and manage prairie dogs are we putting our children at risk?

## The Law and Prairie Dogs

- On June 4, 1997 the Wyoming Attorney General issued an opinion that in absence of any equivalent Federal Law for vertebrate pest control the Wyoming Weed and Pest Act of 1973 can be enforced on public land.
- Wyoming State Laws give County Commissioners the right to control rodents under section 18-5-105.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Landowners can use prairie dogs to increase income by selling hunting rights, but there is some evidence that hunting tends to increase populations and because prairie dogs are cannibalistic the consumption of the killed dogs may increase their immunity to the plague.

## WHAT CAN WE DO? (cont)

- There is also some evidence that no matter how many times historical towns are eliminated by plague or control methods the dogs will return. We may have to leave these areas and concentrate on control and reclamation in the newer towns.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?(cont)

- Are there ways we can control the spread of these new towns?
- The answer is yes. We can use chemical control and eco friendly raptor poles and other methods.  
Raptor pole placement in the past was scattered through out the town.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?(cont)

- This has proven to be ineffective at controlling the spread of towns in fact it causes the town to spread out even more to get away from the raptors. BY placing the raptor poles around the perimeter of the town the dogs tend to draw in to a more concentrated area.

## WHAT CAN WE DO? (cont)

- Another practice is to have coyote hunters dump the dead coyotes inside the towns in hope that one of the carcass may have the plague.
- Whatever we do , we must do it with the cooperation of our neighbors, Weed and Pest Districts, and remember to always use good management practices in the control and reclamation of prairie dogs and their towns.



