

## **Fact Sheet: Debunking Common Prairie Dog Myths**

Few animals engender as much controversy as black-tailed prairie dogs. Unfortunately, negative reactions and even downright hatred of these rodents are fueled by misconceptions. Years of careful scientific study, taken together with experiential data, offer a more comprehensive picture of these creatures. We have learned that their presence is crucial to the survival of other prairie species. We have also learned that they have little impact on cattle grazing operations, a major industry of the Plains. Furthermore, black-tailed prairie dogs are very intelligent and have one of the most complex language systems ever studied. Refuting the myths about prairie dogs is a start to protecting the entire prairie ecosystem.

### **PRAIRIE DOGS ARE NOT OVERPOPULATING.**

Black-tailed prairie dogs may be facing extinction. They have been poisoned, shot and bulldozed to less than 1 percent of their historic population size. Plague is also a major killer. No healthy prairie dog complexes currently exist in the Southern Plains within the United States.

### **PRAIRIE DOGS DO NOT BREED LIKE CRAZY.**

Prairie dogs actually breed at a very low rate compared to other small mammals. They reproduce only once per year, and the average litter size is two to three pups. Confronted with barriers to expansion or years of poor vegetative growth, prairie dogs practice population control.

### **PRAIRIE DOGS DO NOT CARRY PLAGUE.**

In fact, prairie dogs do not pose a major risk for spreading plague to humans because when they are exposed to the disease they normally die too quickly to pass it on to us. The Colorado Department of Health has documented only 42 plague cases since 1957. Of those, just six are linked to prairie dogs. Other mammals, such as cats and dogs who have some immunity, can carry the plague by hosting fleas with the plague bacterium. Humans should take steps to avoid contracting the plague, but it is easily treatable with standard antibiotics.

### **PRAIRIE DOGS AND CATTLE CAN COEXIST.**

It is understandable why people believe that prairie dogs compete with cattle for forage. Looking onto a prairie dog colony, one often sees bare ground and less grass. However, the grasses on colonies are higher in nutritional quality than uncolonized areas despite less overall quantity.

### **COLORADO CITIZENS WANT TO PROTECT PRAIRIE DOGS AND OTHER WILDLIFE.**

We have witnessed an outpouring of support for prairie dogs over the last few years in Colorado. Concerned citizens are rising up to protect individual colonies slated for poisoning, developing or shooting contests and pushing their local governments to adopt policies meant to protect prairie dogs and their habitat. These actions are a part of a growing desire of Colorado citizens to protect state wildlife, critical wildlife habitat and open space in general. Furthermore, 69 percent of Colorado voters recently polled favored federal and state agencies establishing strict protections for prairie dogs on public land.



## **Fact Sheet References**

PRAIRIE DOGS ARE NOT OVERPOPULATING.

Marsh, R.E. 1984. "Ground Squirrels, Prairie Dogs, Marmots as Pests on Rangeland." Proceedings of the Conference for Organization and Practice of Vertebrate Pest Control. ICI Plant Protection Division, Fernherst, UK.

Miller, Brian, Gerardo Ceballos, and Richard P. Reading. 1994. "The Prairie Dog and Biotic Diversity." Conservation Biology 8(3):677-81.

PRAIRIE DOGS DO NOT BREED LIKE CRAZY.

The Nature Conservancy. 1995 "Element Stewardship Abstract for *Cynomys Ludovicianus* (black-tailed prairie dog)."

Hoogland, John. 1995. The Black-tailed Prairie Dog: Social Life of a Burrowing Mammal. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hoogland, John. 1985. "Infanticide in Prairie Dogs: Lactating Females Kill Offspring of Close Kin." Science 230: 1037-40.

PRAIRIE DOGS DO NOT CARRY PLAGUE.

Data obtained from the U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention and Colorado Department of Health.

COLORADO CITIZENS WANT TO PROTECT PRAIRIE DOGS AND OTHER WILDLIFE.

The cities of Boulder and Fort Collins, Colorado have both adopted progressive prairie dog management plans thanks to participation by citizen prairie dog advocates.

A moratorium on prairie dog poisoning has been issued by the city of Superior.

New land use regulations proposed by Boulder County will help minimize disturbance to prairie dog habitat.

Recently the Mayor of Louisville, Tom Davidson, intervened to stop a real estate developer from poisoning a colony of prairie dogs.

Mobilized citizens fought a plan by the City of Lakewood Open Space to poison prairie dogs on open space; they successfully gained a legal injunction against prairie dog poisoning and encouraged the City Council to convene a roundtable to develop a non-lethal prairie dog management plan.

Citizen groups are trying to stop the city of Arvada from removing prairie dogs from open space property.

In 1992, Colorado residents voted favorably on a citizens initiative to stop spring bear hunting.

In 1996, the state's citizens joined together again to prohibit the use of leghold traps statewide.

In 1997, a coalition of citizen groups successfully pushed the Colorado Division of Wildlife to restrict wildlife contest killing.

A recent survey by Great Outdoors Colorado found that more than 70 percent of Colorado residents surveyed want GOCO funds to go to wildlife protection programs.