

Fact Sheet: Prairie Dogs and Cattle

Despite a belief that black-tailed prairie dogs compete with cattle for forage, more than two decades of scientific research finds the claims that prairie dogs are destructive to ranching are grossly overstated. Many ranchers do not exterminate the prairie dogs on their land and suffer no economic loss. The myth that prairie dogs and livestock are incompatible was started in 1902 by an unsubstantiated proclamation made by researcher C.H. Merriam who declared that prairie dogs rob cattle of 50 to 75 percent of their forage.

This spurious information, coupled with demands by Western ranchers for control measures, set government prairie dog eradication programs in motion. These programs continue despite the proliferation of new knowledge finding that Merriam and others were wrong. Laying this damaging myth to rest is long overdue. The bottom line is that cattle ranchers should not fear prairie dogs living on or near grazing areas.

PRAIRIE DOGS DO NOT DEplete FORAGE.

Scientific research shows over and over again that cattle who graze on pastures with prairie dog colonies do not weigh significantly less than cattle who graze on uncolonized areas.

CATTLE OFTEN PREFER THE GRASSES ON PRAIRIE DOG COLONIES.

Bison, who are ungulates like cattle, coexisted for thousands of years among 700 million acres of prairie dogs. Bison, elk, antelope and cattle prefer to graze in prairie dog colonies. The grasses on prairie dog colonies are more succulent, nutritious and digestible, which compensates for grass that prairie dogs eat. Cows and bison also need to graze on uncolonized areas to consume an adequate volume of bulk. Prairie dogs naturally create a mosaic of colonized and uncolonized areas, leaving most available area uncolonized when they are not controlled.

PRAIRIE DOGS CONTROL WEEDS.

Prairie dogs control sagebrush, mesquite, prickly pear and other weeds noxious to native ungulates and livestock. For example, studies show that prairie dogs consume mesquite, an invader that degrades the economic value of rangeland and makes round-ups difficult. Prairie dogs also eat grasshoppers, which benefits agriculture.

PRAIRIE DOG BURROWS ARE NOT A DANGER TO GRAZING LIVESTOCK.

Now that cattle are no longer run in herds, it is extremely rare for livestock to break their legs in prairie dog burrows. As long as cattle are permitted to see where they are going, they easily avoid burrows. Many ranchers scoff at this rural fable.

POISONING PRAIRIE DOGS IS NOT COST-EFFECTIVE.

Even with government-subsidized extirpation programs, it costs ranchers more money to control prairie dogs than is gained in increased forage. Often, it costs more per acre to poison than the land is worth. Ranchers who exterminate prairie dogs may be wasting time and money.

