

Fact Sheet: Decline of the Shortgrass Prairie

There is growing global concern over the loss of biodiversity caused by human activities. Scientists have concluded that grasslands are the most imperiled major ecological regions worldwide. The shortgrass prairie may be moving closer to the brink of ecological collapse, given the dramatic alteration of the plains by human agriculture and development.

THE SHORTGRASS PRAIRIE IS IN SEVERE DECLINE.

The dramatic alteration of prairies by humans is unparalleled among North American ecosystems. No expanses of healthy, shortgrass prairie remain in the Southern Plains. In the United States, we are left with only small and isolated remnants.

BIODIVERSITY OF THE SHORTGRASS PRAIRIE DEPENDS ON THE PRAIRIE DOG.

The overall degradation of natural processes in the Great Plains and the biological imperilment of the prairie dog are closely linked. A host of scientific research links the reduction of prairie dogs, the destruction of habitat, and the loss of biodiversity. This biological imperilment has dramatically manifested itself: there are 55 grassland species listed as endangered or threatened and 728 grassland candidates waiting to be listed.

BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOGS ARE DISAPPEARING.

Prairie dogs now occupy less than 1 percent of their historic range. Even those interested in controlling prairie dogs on rangeland acknowledge a 98 percent decline. Less than 800,000 acres of black-tailed prairie dogs remain, down from estimates of 100 to 700 million acres around 1900. The species may soon receive protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Threats to prairie dogs are multiple: poisoning, bulldozing, shooting and plague. All contribute to the reduction of prairie dog acres and to the condition of small, isolated and fragmented prairie dog populations, which may seriously threaten prairie dog viability.

Poisoning has greatly reduced prairie dog populations, and it continues to be unrestricted on private lands. In the 1920s alone, 13 million hectares (about 32 million acres) of prairie dog colonies were poisoned in the United States. In Colorado, 91 percent of prairie dogs had been eliminated through poisoning as early as 1912. Today, poisoning continues. Federal agencies distribute poison to land owners and poison prairie dogs on federal land.

Other threats to prairie dogs include development and shooting. In Colorado, development alone may account for a 25 percent overall reduction in prairie dog acres. Shooting also causes dramatic population reductions and social disruption which may result in genetic inbreeding.

THERE IS LITTLE PROTECTION FOR PRAIRIE DOGS, EVEN ON PUBLIC LAND.

Despite the drastic decline of the shortgrass prairie and the prairie dog ecosystem, the majority of our public lands remain inhospitable to prairie dogs, due to prejudices of federal, state and local public land managers. Refuge on private land may be this ecosystem's last hope.

