

In Kansas, a Line Is Drawn Around a Prairie Dog Town



Byron Sowers with son Bryon, on their farm in western Kansas. "It's devaluing my property," Mr. Sowers said of the prairie dog colony.



Their absence, in a landscape whose contours are etched by absence — not many trees, not many hills, not many people — would have been unremarkable had it not been for the general expectation that the day would bring a climactic confrontation over the fate of the largest prairie dog colony in [Kansas](#).

The Logan County commissioners want the prairie dogs dead. But two ranchers, Larry Haverfield and Gordon Barnhardt, and their allies in two environmental groups want the 5,500-acre colony on their property to flourish, for the good of the land and for the eventual delectation of black-footed ferrets. The ferrets, an endangered mammal, thrive on a diet of prairie dogs.

The ranchers' defense of prairie dogs prompted bewilderment then anger in this county of about 3,100 people. Here in this red corner of a red state, where the sanctity of property rights is seldom questioned and the sanity of the government is questioned all the time, the prairie dog debate has turned everything upside down.

Some people are demanding enforcement of a century-old state law allowing the county to send exterminators onto the Haverfield and Barnhardt ranches — against the owners' wishes but at their expense — to protect local property values.

This confrontation is one of several in recent years across the West that pit property owners trying to restore wildlife against local governments who see the actions as a threat to local economic interests. It also reflects the persistent belief in the Great Plains that the prairie dog is not a valued remnant of the short-grass prairie of the past, but a despised pest that eats grass needed to fatten cattle.

Alan Pollom, the director of the Kansas chapter of the [Nature Conservancy](#), called the question of conserving prairie dogs “one of the more vexing problems you can possibly come up with in the arena of wildlife management” because property lines tend to be incompatible with the prairie dogs' age-old practice of digging new holes and expanding their tunneled colonies across the landscape.

The anger at the large prairie dog town was sharpened when the federal [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) began to consider a proposal by the two ranchers to reintroduce the black-footed ferret on their lands. It is widely believed here that having an endangered species anywhere near one's land means nothing but trouble.

Mr. Haverfield, who is 70, and his wife, Betty, 71, are perfectly content to have neighbors and friends shoot some of the thousands of prairie dogs for sport. They just do not want them poisoned en masse. Neither does Mr. Barnhardt, who lives a few counties away and whose land Mr. Haverfield keeps an eye on.

The Haverfield way of ranching — rotation grazing, a rarity in this region — is designed to mimic the patterns of bison grazing. By moving the cows from pasture to pasture quickly, he said, he can accommodate both cattle and rodent, improve the soil and the grass and promote the return of those species drawn either to prairie dogs' abandoned holes (such as burrowing owls and badgers) or to their flesh (foxes, rattlesnakes, hawks and eagles).

In recent years, as the prairie dog town expanded, “We're seeing some species that we've never seen before,” Mr. Haverfield said, as his 1979 Ford pickup

lumbered over some thoroughly munched grass and beneath a high-soaring golden eagle. “Other animals are affected,” he added. “The swift fox eats prairie dogs. So do the ferruginous hawks. And coyotes.”

A few miles north, Byron Sowers, a neighbor of Mr. Haverfield’s, was busy with the wintertime weaning of this year’s calves. Mr. Sowers’s voice has been among the loudest of those demanding that the county do something about the prairie dogs, which he says are exporting their young to his land.

“It’s devaluing my property,” Mr. Sowers said, raising his voice to be heard over the complaining calves.

He does not necessarily share the other widespread — and, environmentalists say, unproven — belief that cattle break their legs in prairie dog holes. But because the rodents compete for grass, renting out grassland with prairie dogs brings in less money, the county appraiser confirmed. In general, Mr. Sowers feels about ranching near a prairie dog town the way urban parents feel about living near a halfway house.

Mr. Sowers argues that his 900-acre property bordering Mr. Haverfield’s had only 10 acres of prairie dog town when he bought it. Now, he said, despite annual poisonings costing \$2,500 or more, the colony covers 500 acres.

Picture credits: Kevin Moloney for The New York Times