

A Fresh Battle In South Dakota's Prairie Dog War

Federal Decision May Allow More Poisoning

By Peter Slevin
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WALL, S.D. -- Here on the sun-parched prairie, where rain seems as rare as gold dust, the fight over federal grassland is unending, pitting the backers of the crowd-pleasing prairie dog against the supporters of the humble cow. This week, the Bush administration could open the door to poisoning more of the furry rodents in order to help the cattle.

A new environmental assessment will say that more prairie dog colonies can safely be targeted. Although the [U.S. Forest Service](#) will not make a decision until after a 45-day public comment period, conservation activists started to complain even before federal staff members in recent days mailed the document to politicians and advocates.

Challenging ranchers who rely on public land for grazing, activists warned that a reduced habitat for prairie dogs would pose setbacks for [Great Plains](#) biodiversity and fragile communities of black-footed ferrets. The ferrets, masked members of the weasel family, were all but extinct a decade ago but have slowly been returning with careful attention from the federal government.

It happens that the ferrets, often called the most endangered mammal in [North America](#), prefer one delicacy to all others: prairie dogs. They eat almost nothing else.

The controversy is unfolding as ranchers feel embattled and environmentalists feel emboldened by the national momentum toward conservation and "green" policies. Myron Williams, a prominent rancher in Wall, just north of the contested Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, has been pressing political appointees in the Bush administration to act while they still can.

"You'll always have to fight it, but it'll probably be worse under some administrations," Williams said from behind the wheel of his pickup in Badlands National Park. "Prairie dogs have always been there and they always will be, and we've just got to find a way to live with them. But there's a limit."

Although prairie dogs were once considered at risk themselves, the population has grown, and ranchers may do what they like to the critters on their own land. The contest is over taxpayer-owned land, where various public and private interests compete.

Even within the government, there is disagreement on how the land -- and the prairie dog population -- should be managed. Federal authorities have been dusting burrows with flea powder to protect prairie dogs from sylvatic plague in some areas while allowing poisoning in others.

Mike Lockhart, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife official responsible for the black-footed ferret recovery program, is deeply worried about potential changes to the rules governing prairie dogs in the Conata Basin, the area near Wall where ferrets have staged their strongest recovery. There are now 100 breeding pairs, compared with the 18 ferrets discovered in Meeteetse, [Wyo.](#), in 1981, when many naturalists assumed the species was extinct.

Lockhart believes that prairie dog colonies need to become larger, not smaller, and that public land is the key.

"If we're going to be honest about what we need to recover the species, we're going to have substantially more habitat base than we've got right now," Lockhart said. "If we can't make room for recovery of species like this on federal public land in a meaningful way, we will not be able to recover the species. Period."

Roughly 16 ranchers have permits to graze 2,300 head of cattle on the grasslands of the Conata Basin and an area nearby. Environmentalists contend that their numbers are too small to justify changes in wildlife protections.

Black-tailed prairie dogs once had the run of the plains from [Canada](#) to [Mexico](#), but they were driven out by human competitors and plague. Ranchers call them varmints and complain about the rodents' habit of cutting tall grass with their teeth so they can spot predators. In western [South Dakota](#), years of drought have also meant that they compete with cattle for food.

For years, South Dakota politicians from both parties have championed the ranchers' cause, questioning why prairie dogs should be allowed to prosper at the expense of private landowners who hold federal grazing permits. As recently as April 26, [Sen. John Thune](#) (R-S.D.) asked [Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne](#) to guarantee financial compensation to people whose livelihoods are affected by the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret to Wind Cave National Park.

The U.S. Forest Service, which manages federal grasslands, approved a management plan in 2002 that made black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs a priority. Two years later, as the drought deepened and prairie dog populations expanded, the agency permitted poisoning to stop them from burrowing onto private land.

"We were trying to be good neighbors," said Don Bright, the agency's [Nebraska](#)-based regional director.

A group of environmental groups sued. A settlement created a buffer zone where [U.S.](#) authorities deposit poisoned oats. Yet few were satisfied. Bright said a continuing study led to the current environmental impact report.

The report is expected to say that prairie dog colonies can be further restricted on federal land without posing a new threat to the ferrets, then lays out five alternatives, including

one designed by the South Dakota and Nebraska governments and one by local officials, Bright said Friday in a telephone interview. He described them as a spectrum of options, from doing nothing new to poisoning a relatively large number of acres in the grasslands' interior.

He said the Forest Service is committed to sustaining the ferret.

"This is not about wholesale poisoning. This is not about extermination. This is about very specific criteria about when poisoning would occur," Bright said. He said the criteria would be tied closely to vegetation levels and the size of prairie dog towns.

Jonathan Proctor, a [Denver](#)-based prairie dog advocate with Defenders of Wildlife, called the exercise a "complete reversal of Forest Service policy."

"Prairie dogs are currently protected from poisoning in interior areas. Any alternative selected -- other than no action -- will remove existing protections and allow poisoning anywhere," Proctor said. "It is a significant example of federal and state agencies' race to the bottom to repeal the limited protections they implemented when the black-tailed prairie dog was a candidate for Endangered Species Act listing."

Congressional aides predicted that the Forest Service will ultimately allow expanded poisoning of prairie dogs, though not as much as some ranchers might like.

"They would like to do some control on the interior of prairie dog towns, where it's really thick," one Senate aide said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. He added that federal officials feel pressure to please both sides now that both environmental and ranching groups have sued them on the issue.

Proctor was in Wall last week. Among his purposes was to search for compromise, including asking ranchers about trading their public leases for access to private land that, he said, conservation forces are willing to buy nearby. Hearing the idea for the first time, Williams said he liked the notion, but he suspects that environmental groups would ask for more and more concessions.

"I'd take it in a heartbeat, if he'd then go away and leave us alone," Williams said. "But he'll be back."

As they sat in a restaurant, Williams and Pennington County Commissioner James Kjerstad said they expect to win the battle when the new rules are approved later this year, but lose the war. They believe the political winds will keep shifting as the conservation movement continues to gather strength and that the Badlands cattle will be fenced out of federal grassland.

"Those permits will go away," Kjerstad said, "one way or another."

Staff writer Juliet Eilperin in Washington contributed to this report.

