

ABSTRACT

Black-Tailed Prairie Dogs: A New Era of Management?

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For more than a hundred years, prairie dogs have been considered pests, leading to widespread eradication programs carried out at federal, state, and local levels. These programs along with other factors such as habitat destruction, recreational hunting, and sylvatic plague have led to a 98% decrease in prairie dog populations in the United States. As awareness of prairie dogs and their importance to the prairie ecosystem has increased, a new management objective has come into the forefront—one of prairie dog conservation. This objective encompasses the protection of current prairie dog populations and their associated habitats, and ultimately an increase in their numbers to a sustainable level. The current problem is how to institute this new objective in a way that garners public support. Not only must existing management plans be changed, but the public beliefs that prairie dogs are pests must be altered. This paper analyzes the problem, specifically focusing on past management policies related to the black-tailed prairie dog, as well as the alternative conservation plans currently under consideration. The federal government has been petitioned by various environmental groups to list the black-tailed prairie dog as a threatened species. One alternative would be for this listing to occur. As a second alternative, the eleven states within the historic black-tailed prairie dog range have written a cooperative interstate management plan, in lieu of federal listing of the black-tailed prairie dogs. A third alternative would be to use a “practice-based” approach, finding programs that have already been successfully implemented and using those as models in other locations. The practice-based alternative is recommended because it recognizes that one management plan will not suit every situation. New programs can be tailored to their specific sites. Programs that have worked in specific areas can be used as a template for new programs in similar areas. New programs can be evaluated and modified as needed.

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