

1. Description

There are nine active prairie dog sites with thirteen different coterries in Metro District owned open space areas. The habitat of these colonies is fragmented by urban development, the majority of which are residential homes. Many of these colonies are adjacent to residential homes, parks, and trails. Limited expansion opportunities contribute to overpopulation of prairie dog colonies, over grazing of short grass prairie, close contact with humans, and damage to private property.

Commercial and residential development in Highlands Ranch has limited the presence, and the effectiveness of predators such as coyotes, hawks, snakes, and eagles. These predators are more abundant in natural ecosystems and help to control prairie dog populations.

2. Goals

We are committed to Managing open space as healthy natural systems, by maintaining a rich diversity of native plants and animals. Conservation and management of native wildlife populations through habitat management is crucial to this challenge.

In accordance with the Metro District's Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Plan, prairie dog populations will be conserved with the following objectives:

- Minimize health or safety hazards;
- Manage natural areas for species and ecosystem diversity;
- Maintain healthy prairie dog colonies;
- Minimize damage to public and private property;
- Minimize possibilities for future conflicts between prairie dogs and humans.

3. Opportunities for Relocation and Issues

Seven of the prairie dog colonies maintained in the Metro District's open space have been fragmented into small habitat blocks, primarily due to residential development. Prairie dog populations often exceed the carrying capacity of the land. When this happens open space areas are invaded with noxious weeds, prairie dog / human contacts become more prevalent, and damage to private property often occurs.

On June 7, staff met with the Front Range Black-tailed Prairie Dog Work Group and notified them that the Metro District would be removing prairie dogs in October 2007. We requested knowledge of wild to wild relocation sites for prairie dogs. This group

represents fifteen city, county, federal and state agencies on the Front Range of Colorado. Again, on July 17, 2006, staff sent email messages to 64 people that participate in this group. Request for relocation sites were also sent to the Highlands Ranch Community Association and Shea Homes. The Metro District received 20 responses from resource staff indicating that they did not have or were not aware of any relocation sites on the Front Range of Colorado.

4. Property Owners

The Metro District may exterminate without public notice those prairie dogs that disperse from the District's land onto adjacent land only with permission of the property owner and pursuant to a written request by the property owner. [Property owners have a responsibility to protect their property from prairie dogs by erecting and maintaining fence barriers in accordance with the covenants of the Highlands Ranch Community Association \(HRCA\).](#) The Metro District will not perform this service if the property owner has not taken appropriate action to protect their property from prairie dogs.

5. Process

The Survey:

Metro District open space staff formally survey and assess prairie dog colonies maintained in Metro District's open space two times per year. Each survey includes three separate visual animal counts with binoculars at a non threatening distance from the colony. The counts are then averaged to determine population densities. Staff also monitor for the presence or absence of burrowing owls in prairie dog colonies.

In addition to physically counting prairie dogs, open space staff observes the seven criteria as outlined in the Prairie Dog Conservation Plan, *Guidelines for Managing a Prairie Dog Colony*. We assess the general health of the colony, the colony size in acres, destruction of private property, human health and safety hazards, noxious weed invasions and general vegetative health and types of cover, planned development of the site, and passive management objectives. Combinations of these factors are considered when determining the need to remove prairie dogs.

2007 Prairie Dog Colony Survey							
Colony Site	Colony Acres	Est. Pop./ac	Burrows 50' H, 30' T	Bare Ground	Native Grasses	Weeds	Native Forbes
Spring Gulch Hyacinth-Hrpkwy	2.9	18	2, 21	50%	20%	30%	0%
Spring Gulch Stone Mtn.to Foothills trail	7.0	25	20, 33	50%	15%	25%	10%
Spring Gulch Hyacinth to Foothills trail	4.5	19	16, 5	50%	20%	20%	10%
Spring Gulch Stone Mtn to Southbury Pl	8.0	23	30, 0	5%	5%	90%	0%
Spring Gulch Weathersfield to Southbury Pl	3.1	10	9, 0	25%	5%	60%	10%
Big Dry Creek Park	1.5	26	14, 5	30%	10%	55%	5%
Vista/Falcon Trail	1.4	4	0, 6	15%	70%	15%	0%
Saddle Ranch	1.1	5	0, 0	75%	10%	10%	5%
E. Big Dry (West)	20.7	9	0, 47	35%	0%	55%	10%
E. Big Dry (East)	9.1	9	60, 5	40%	5%	30%	25%
Dad Clark @ Northridge	8.1	14	0, 0	40%	40%	5%	15%
Wildcat Gas substation	1.5	11	0, 8	30%	25%	45%	0%
Marcy @ Sand Cherry Wy	0.3	5	0, 0	35%	20%	30%	15%

Relocation and Resident Notification:

When it is appropriate to manage a prairie dog site, and relocation sites are not available, we will consider other environmentally sound options as recommended by the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW). The two options available are; delivery to conservation programs and lethal control. Lethal control is an option that has been studied and will only be used when approved relocation sites are not available or preferred techniques are not an option. Lethal control will not be used to maintain population carrying capacity.

At least thirty days prior to annual management of prairie dog sites, staff will:

- Notify adjacent property owners in writing of the planned action.
- Post signage at trail locations adjacent to the colony explaining the planned actions.
- Post this Planned Actions Fact Sheet on the Metro District's website, with link to the previous year's fact sheet

If lethal control is considered as an option, staff will, in addition to the above:

- Meet with residents and landowners affected by this action as requested on-site to discuss this action in further detail.
- Notify Tri-County Health Department one week prior to the planned control.
- Coordinate this action through the CDOW. Lethal controls will be in compliance with the State of Colorado's pesticide application laws.

6. Project Team

Nick Adamson, open space supervisor, oversees the implementation of the prairie dog conservation plan, and coordinates the prairie dog removal process, trail user notification signs, and resident notifications by letter.

Scott Nelson, natural resource specialist, is assigned the responsibilities of monitoring the prairie dog colonies, conducting formal inventories, and maintaining aerial photographs showing the colony size for year to year comparisons. In addition, Scott

maintains records of inventory counts, burrowing owl surveys, and prairie dog live catch records consisting of animal counts by gender and age.

Scott and Nick work directly with private property owners throughout the year to record and mitigate property damage. Bill Dailey, Metro District natural resources manager and Crystal Peterson, CDOW wildlife manager, participate in an advisory capacity, and to provide information to the public.

7. Research

In meeting the challenge to maintain healthy prairie dog populations in our open space, the Metro District's Board of Directors in December 2005, appointed a Task Force to review the District's Prairie Dog Conservation Plan. The Task Force consisted of nine members representing Highlands Ranch residents, the CDOW, Tri-County Environmental Health Services, conservation group representatives, the Prairie Preservation Alliance and Douglas County Citizens for Wildlife, and the Metro District. In July 2006, the Metro District Board of Directors approved revisions to the Metro District's Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Plan. This plan is available on our website at www.highlandsranch.org.

Our staff annually keeps current on regulations pertaining to the Black-tailed prairie dog by maintaining membership and attending quarterly Front Range Black-tailed Prairie Dog Work Group meetings. We also work closely with our assigned CDOW wildlife manager, Crystal Peterson.

8. Alternatives Studied

Three alternatives have been studied:

- Relocation includes live trapping prairie dogs by setting live traps, or by burrow flushing.
- Delivery to a conservation program is giving prairie dogs that have been live trapped to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center in support of the Black-footed Ferret Recovery Program. The second option would be to deliver prairie dogs to a raptor rehabilitation program. In both of these options, prairie dogs would be euthanized and used as a food source for raptors and Black-footed Ferrets. For more information on these programs to save these endangered and protected species see <http://www.blackfootedferret.org/who.html> or <http://www.usaref.org/Rehab.htm>.
- Lethal Control is an option that has been studied and will only be used when no approved relocation sites are available or preferred techniques are not an option. Acceptable methods are limited to the use of fumigants approved by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Poison bait or oral toxicants will not be used as a means of control.

9. Recommended or Preferred Action

The Metro District's preferred action is to live catch prairie dogs by burrow flushing. We have found through experience and a great deal of research that this method has a high animal survival rate of greater than 95 percent.

According to Mike Lockhardt, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinator with the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program, "Because of the threat of plague and monkey pox, it's illegal to capture live prairie dogs except with certain exemptions."

Contractors must be permitted by the CDOW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and have met all criteria for exemption to relocate prairie dogs to the Federal Ferret Recovery Program. The Metro District only uses and closely monitors licensed contractors for burrowing flushing of prairie dogs. In working with the Front Range Black-tailed Prairie Dog Work Group representing fifteen city, county, federal and state agencies on the Front Range of Colorado, we have not found relocation sites on the Front Range of Colorado. There are no relocation sites on Metro District property.

To achieve our objectives as outlined in item #2, Goals, the Specific Prairie Dog Site Recommendations for 2007 are:

- a. First priority - to flush all burrows affecting private property and within six feet of trails.
- b. Second priority - remove prairie dogs from unsuitable areas.
- c. Third priority - achieve population density goals, as outlined in the following table, and
- d. Vegetation management of areas burrow flushed.

2007 Prairie Dog Removal Goals						
Colony Site	Colony Size Acres	Colony Population	Population Goal @ 16 ac.*	Population per Acre	2007 Removal Goals	
Spring Gulch Hyacinth-Hrpkwy	2.9	53	46	18	Removal from unsuitable areas and 6 ft. of trail	
Spring Gulch Stone Mtn.to Foothills trail	7.0	178	112	25		
Spring Gulch Hyacinth to Foothills trail	4.5	86	72	19		
Spring Gulch Stone Mtn to Southbury PI	8.0	183	128	23		
Spring Gulch Weathersfield to Southbury PI	3.1	32	50	10		
Big Dry Creek Park	1.5	39	24	26		
Vista/Falcon Trail	1.4	7	21	4		
Saddle Ranch	1.1	6	18	5		
E. Big Dry (West)	20.7	177	331	9		
E. Big Dry (East)	9.1	84	144	9		
Dad Clark @ Northridge	8.1	116	128	14		
Marcy @ Sand Cherry Wy	0.3	7	5	n/a		No Action

* Our goal is to maintain prairie dog colonies at carrying capacity of the land. If the land has a healthy stand of short grasses, it will only support approximately 16 to 20 prairie dogs per acre (Seery 1997). There is a lack of desirable vegetation associated with all of our prairie dog colonies, and there are significant noxious weed problems and bare ground that is susceptible to soil erosion. Prairie dogs continue to cause significant resource damage and create safety hazards by burrowing in natural surface trails, next to concrete trails and in private property. In areas where resource degradation or private property damage is occurring, prairie dog numbers may be reduced below 16 animals per acre.

The 2007 removal goals are to remove prairie dogs from unsuitable sites and six feet of trails as outlined in the maps at the end of this fact sheet.

10. Financial Considerations

Prairie dog relocations are funded annually through the open space operations budget. The 2007 prairie dog removal/management budget is \$7,500. This budget is reviewed annually. Allocations may vary from year to year depending on Metro District priorities.

11. Implementation

We have received exemptions from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to burrow flush and transport live prairie dogs to the Federal Ferret Recovery Program.

12. Monitoring and Evaluation

Prairie dog colonies on Metro District-owned open space areas are monitored on an ongoing basis and formally counted two times per year.

2006 - 2007 Colony Management Actions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Big Dry Creek (West) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeded with native grasses - Site survey - Addition of soil amendment - Mechanical weed management - Installed two raptor poles • East Big Dry Creek (East) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site survey - Installed two raptor poles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saddle Ranch <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site survey - Mechanical weed management - Backfilled holes three times in and adjacent to sports field - Exterminated 14 burrows in and within 50 feet of sports field - Removal slated for 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring Gulch at Foothills Trail <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site survey - Mechanical and chemical weed management - Addition of soil amendment - Seeded with native grasses - Installed one raptor pole 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spring Gulch at Highlands Ranch Pkwy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Planting of shrubs - Site survey - Mechanical and chemical weed management - Installed one raptor pole
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dad Clark at Northridge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site survey - Installed two raptor poles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vista/Falcon Trail <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site survey - Mechanical weed management - Completed Raptor pole improvements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big Dry Park <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeded with native grasses - Site survey - Addition of soil amendment - Backfilled holes three times in and adjacent to sports field - Exterminated 10 burrows in and within 50 feet of sports field - Installed one raptor pole 	

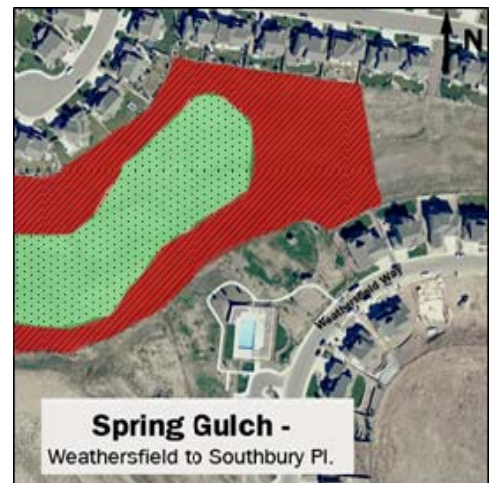
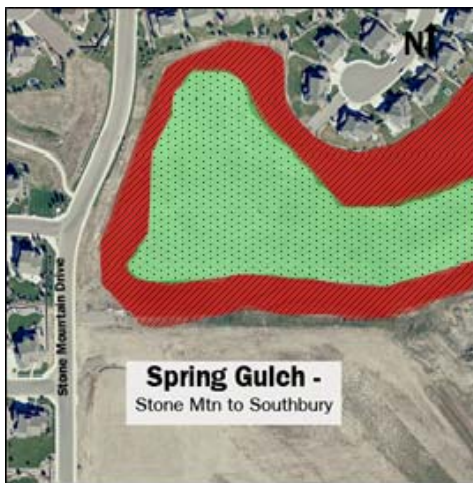
The following maps show areas where prairie dog burrow flushing will occur, beginning Monday, October 8.



Suitable for prairie dogs



Unsuitable for prairie dogs





For more information, please contact:

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