

## *2008 Prairie Dog Management*

### 1. Description

There are nine active prairie dog sites in Metro District 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 “Manage 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 Districts’ Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Plan (PDCP), 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 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 April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008, we notified the Front Range Black-tailed Prairie Dog Work Group that the District would be removing prairie dogs. 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. Request for relocation

sites were also sent out to the Highlands Ranch Community Association and Shea Homes. Responses from Resource staff with these agencies indicated that they were not aware of any relocation sites.

## 4. Process

### The Survey:

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 Section 2 of the PDCP, "*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 including types of ground cover, planned development of the site, and passive management objectives. Combinations of these factors are considered when determining the need to remove prairie dogs. Below is the 2008 prairie dog colony survey:

2008 Prairie Dog Colony Survey							
Colony Site	Colony Acres	Est. Pop./Ac.	Burrows 50' H 20'T	Bare Ground	Native Grasses	Weeds	Native Forbes
Spring Gulch – Woodrose Ct.	2.9	23	30,32	25%	10%	65%	0%
Spring Gulch – Foothills Trail	9.0	27	70,55	40%	15%	35%	10%
Spring Gulch – Pronghorn Park	11.7	50	27,32	50%	15%	25%	10%
Big Dry Creek Park (Reverse Dispersal Translocation Site)	2.2	42	16,5	10%	0%	75%	15%
Vista Trail (Reverse Dispersal Translocation Site)	1	5	1,1	30%	5%	60%	5%
East Big Dry (west)	24	9	30,10	10%	0%	70%	20%
East Big Dry (east)	10.6	9	0,32	15%	10%	30%	45%
Dad Clark at Northridge	6.9	11	0,0	30%	5%	5%	60%
Wildcat Trail - Xcel Substation	1.5	40	0,8	10%	40%	45%	5%
Marcy at Sand Cherry Way	.3	5	2,0	0%	25%	70%	5%

## 5. Management Action

Staff as directed by the PDCP, will manage the following colony sites to maintain carrying capacity of the land, and to remove burrows and prairie dogs located within 50 feet of private property or landscape areas, within six feet of trails, and associated burrows displaying above ground evidence of habit trails leading to private property or trails. The 2008 Site population goals are shown below:

2008 Prairie Dog Removal Goals				
Colony Site	Colony Size Acres	Colony Population	Colony Population Goal *	Population per Acre Goal
Spring Gulch Woodrose Ct.	2.9	68	35	12
Spring Gulch - Foothills Trail	9.0	246	Site designate as unsuitable for prairie dogs	
Spring Gulch - Pronghorn Park	11.7	576	See Section 7 - Monitoring and Evaluation	
E. Big Dry (West)	24.0	443	293	12
Marcy @ Sand Cherry Wy	1.0	11	5	5
Wildcat Trail at Xcel Substation	1.2	40	Remove prairie dogs and burrows at Xcel Substation	
Grandview Trail - Barn Owl Drive	0.3	5	Removal	
Vista Trail	RDT - Site being evaluated for moving of prairie dogs			
Big Dry Creek Park	RDT - Site being evaluated for moving of prairie dogs			
Dad Clark at Northridge	6.9	11	No Action to be Taken	

The Districts' goal is to maintain prairie dog colonies at carrying capacity of the land as outlined in Section 4 of the PDCP. 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 improved surface trails, next to concrete trails and on private property

The Districts' Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Plan approved by the Metro District Board of Directors on August 26, 2008 is available on our web site at [www.highlandsranch.org](http://www.highlandsranch.org).

## 6. Implementation

The District's Management Action Protocol is outlined in Section 3 of the Prairie Dog Conservation Plan. The District has received exemptions from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to burrow flush and transport live prairie dogs to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Black-footed Ferret Recovery Program.

## 7. Monitoring and Evaluation

Spring Gulch, Stone Mountain Drive to Weathersfield Way - Remove prairie dogs and burrows, reclaim/reseed area, and manage weeds. Over the next five years, staff will; re-establish grasses and vegetation, analyze impact of storm flows from upstream development, assess need for channel stabilization improvements, and determine wildlife habitat suitability.



## 8. 2008 Site Designated Unsuitable Habitat for Prairie Dogs

Spring Gulch Natural Area, from Hyacinth Road to Stone Mountain Drive, has been designated unsuitable habitat for prairie dogs. Prairie dogs in this area will be completely removed and routinely monitored. Prairie dogs that relocate back in to this area will be removed using any method, without public notification, as part of the ongoing and routine management of this area.



## 9. Contacts

For Further Information, Please Contact:

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