

Utah Prairie Dog

Progress Towards Recovery



Utah prairie dog pups at burrow / © Laura Romin and Larry Dalton

Overview

The Utah prairie dog is federally listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The 2012 Utah Prairie Dog Revised Recovery Plan calls for three recovery units (West Desert, Awapa Plateau, Paunsaugunt) with 2,000 adult animals in each unit (1,000 adults counted in the spring) for five consecutive years within protected areas.

History

Utah prairie dog populations began to decline in the 1920s when lethal control programs (e.g., poisoning) were initiated. This threat, combined with the effects of sylvatic plague (a non-native disease transmitted by fleas) and habitat alteration from large scale agricultural and over-grazing activities, dramatically impacted the species' distribution. As a result, the Utah prairie dog was listed as an endangered species in 1973. With federal protections in place, by 1984, Utah prairie dog populations had expanded in portions of their range and were reclassified to threatened with a special 4(d) rule to allow some additional management flexibility. The special 4(d) rule was revised again in 2012, providing further management flexibility.

Habitat and Population Trends

Utah prairie dogs are found in seven counties (Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, Piute, Sevier, and Wayne) in central southwestern and Utah. The species occurs in semiarid shrub-steppe and grassland habitats where they use deep, well-drained soils for burrowing

and prefer swale-type formations with moist vegetation. Their preferred habitats often coincide with the valley bottoms that are used by farmers, ranchers, and developers. The current distribution of Utah prairie dogs is much reduced from the historical distribution. Range-wide, Utah prairie dog population trends appear to be stable, although the species remains vulnerable to significant threats including habitat loss from urban development (more than 70% of all Utah prairie dogs occur on nonfederal lands) and the loss of prairie dog colonies due to plague.

Recovery Strategy and Progress

The recovery strategy for the Utah prairie dog focuses on the need to address habitat/colony loss and disease through a program that emphasizes conserving existing colonies; establishing additional colonies on federal and protected nonfederal lands via habitat improvement or translocations; and controlling the transmission of plague.

We have seen progress in recovery efforts. Since 1972, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and federal land management agencies have conducted habitat treatments and translocations of Utah prairie dogs from nonfederal to federal lands to establish new colonies. Plague management is key for improving the success of Utah prairie dog translocations and the species' long-term recovery. The Dixie National Forest has seen improved success at Utah prairie dog translocation sites

(e.g., a 68% increase in Utah prairie dogs at translocation sites between 2012 and 2013), likely due to intensive plague management the past several years (dusting Utah prairie dogs and burrows with insecticides). The National Park Service has also been dusting to control plague outbreaks in Bryce Canyon National Park since 2008 and the Bureau of Land Management initiated plague dusting in 2014. Furthermore, plague vaccine development is showing promise and may provide a long-term solution addressing this non-native disease.

Because over 70% of Utah prairie dogs occur on nonfederal lands, we worked with our partners to protect key nonfederal parcels through targeted land acquisitions and easements with willing sellers. These key parcels contain occupied colonies that provide habitat and population connectivity on the landscape. For example, our partners have protected 1,300 acres of occupied habitat through Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) or conservation banks. In addition, the Panoramaland RC&D established the Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Credit Exchange (UPDHCE) in 2010 and has enrolled 280 acres of occupied prairie dog habitat in conservation easements; the UPDHCE sells credits to developers when their projects overlap with Utah prairie dog habitats.

Federal partners have also committed to mitigation strategies that have benefited Utah prairie dogs. In 2013, The Nature Conservancy purchased

800 acres of Utah prairie dog habitat using mitigation funds provided by the Federal Aviation Administration. In addition, the Utah Department of Transportation, and Garkane Energy purchased credits from the UPDHCE to offset ongoing project impacts to Utah prairie dogs.

The Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Implementation Program (UPDRIP) was established in 2010 as a large public-private partnership to recover the prairie dog while balancing ongoing development. The associated Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Implementation Team (UPDRIT) has developed Management Unit plans that are intended to help us achieve recovery by focusing on:

- Habitat improvement and maintenance on federal and other protected habitats,
- Increased plague management,
- Translocations of Utah prairie dogs to establish new colonies on federal and other protected habitats, and
- The use of conservation easements and acquisitions in partnership with willing sellers to protect habitats on nonfederal lands in perpetuity.

Meeting Recovery Criteria

Much emphasis has recently been placed on which prairie dogs “count” towards recovery. Recovery is primarily about ensuring the long-term survival and conservation of a species, and protecting the ecosystems upon which the species depends.

Therefore, recovery is really a two-fold strategy of:

- meeting numerical population and habitat criteria, and
- successfully managing threats to the species long-term.

In our recovery plan, we established numerical recovery criteria goals where each of the three Recovery Units must contain 2,000 adult animals (spring count of 1,000 adult animals) for five consecutive years within protected areas. None of the Recovery Units have met this numeric goal (in protected areas) for five consecutive years, although spring counts in the Paunsaugunt Recovery Unit have significantly increased within the past couple of years and exceeded 1,000 adult spring count on federal or other protected areas in 2014.

Long-term, we hope to recover and delist the Utah prairie dog thus

removing the ESA’s federal protections. To achieve this goal of delisting, we must meet biological targets and be confident that progress will be maintained in the absence of the Act’s protective measures. This has led to our requirement to achieve these targets within protected areas.

Protected areas include federal lands (managed for prairie dogs)

and nonfederal lands that have been purchased or protected with perpetual conservation easements specific for Utah prairie dogs. Only areas specifically dedicated to and managed for Utah prairie dog conservation have a high probability of addressing threats like development, plague, shooting, and poisoning long-term, after delisting. Additionally, in order to address genetic concerns, protected lands also need to be distributed spatially in a manner that provides adequate connectivity.

Next Steps

Management of threats in perpetuity should be accomplished through federal land use planning commitments, state, and local policies and regulations. We have seen recent successes, including the purchase of lands and completion of conservation easements protecting over 1,200 acres of Utah prairie dog habitats across the species range; the development and testing of a new plague vaccine that has shown initial positive results; and the establishment of new prairie dog colonies through translocations on U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands. Implementation of the newly developed Management Unit Plans will help us achieve threat reduction range-wide through landscape level habitat and plague management and targeted land protection, providing a path to recovery. We believe that the Utah prairie dog is a very recoverable species, particularly if we can successfully garner resources, cooperation, and dedication from all involved.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 6
<http://www.fws.gov>
Utah Field Office
(801) 975 - 3330

For State relay service
TTY / Voice: 711

June 2014

