

## **PRAIRIE DOG CONSERVATION IN MONTANA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE<sup>TWS</sup>**

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Coordinated prairie dog conservation began in Montana during the mid 1980s with a survey of prairie dog colonies in eastern Montana and publication of an annotated prairie dog bibliography in 1986 by the Montana Black-footed Ferret Working Group (MPDWG). These actions were undertaken with a desire to manage prairie dogs for re-introduction of the endangered black-footed ferret. In response to the social and biological complexities of prairie dog management, the Montana Prairie Dog Working Group was formed in 1996. Participants in the MPDWG include the full spectrum of viewpoints on prairie dogs (state and federal agencies, tribal representatives, business people, private landowners, non-governmental organizations). The MPDWG worked collaboratively to develop the prairie dog conservation plan for Montana (2002) and continues to support implementation of this plan. Current efforts and accomplishments include a local prairie dog planning effort in NC and NE Montana, developing a statewide prairie dog monitoring strategy and a feasible landowner incentive program, and establishing a Translocation Protocol guiding all future translocations of prairie dogs. The USDI Fish and Wildlife Service issued a finding of “warranted but precluded” for the black-tailed prairie dog in February 2000 and removed the species from further consideration for listing in 2004 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A petition

to list white-tailed prairie dog was deemed “not warranted” in 2004. In the face of concern about implications of listing under the ESA, widely divergent perceptions of prairie dogs as either destructive pests or ecosystem engineers, and declines of species that are associated with prairie dog colonies, the MPDWG continues an interesting, collaborative effort to promote prairie dog conservation. A discussion of the history of prairie dog conservation and associated social, biological, and political challenges were presented.