

**PRAIRIE DOG PANEL - PERSPECTIVE OF THE  
CONSERVATION COMMUNITY <sup>TWS</sup>**

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Defenders of Wildlife is a national non-profit conservation organization of more than

400,000 members and supporters dedicated to preserving the natural abundance and diversity of wildlife and its habitat. We have been working on prairie wildlife conservation in our northern Rockies regional office for over a decade. In 1995 we commissioned a study to evaluate the status of black-tailed prairie dogs. We were concerned by the apparent declines in the species particularly because the black-tailed prairie dog is a keystone species of the grasslands. It is estimated that 170 species rely at some level on prairie dogs for their survival, including America's rarest land mammal, the black-footed ferret. The 1995 study documented that black-tailed prairie dog acreage had been reduced by 98 percent nationwide since the turn of the century. Similar declines have occurred in Montana, where we now have only 70,000 acres occupied by prairie dogs. Large-scale poisoning campaigns, habitat loss primarily from conversion to agriculture, sylvatic plague, and shooting have all contributed to the shrinkage of their range. Defenders of Wildlife and other conservation organizations are taking numerous steps to improve the plight of black-tailed prairie dogs and to conserve and restore grassland ecosystems in Montana and throughout the Great Plains.