

**BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOGS AND CONSERVATION OF GRASSLANDS
ECOSYSTEMS—LEGAL AND BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES^{TWS}**

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Arguably, no native North American mammal has been subject to the level of private and governmental eradication efforts as the black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*). For a century this native species has been poisoned, ploughed, and shot with encouragement from all levels of government. The result, plus impacts from sylvatic plague, has been a reduction of >99 percent in the area occupied by this species in the 10 states with short-grass or mid-grass prairie dog habitat. In Montana alone, prairie dogs occupy only half of the area they occupied 12 years ago as a consequence of impacts of sylvatic plague exacerbated by the absence of regulatory controls on poisoning and shooting on public as well as private lands. In shortgrass prairie systems, control efforts are motivated primarily to reduce competition with livestock although there is no scientific basis for widely-held perceptions that

significant levels of competition exist. Regardless, all states within the prairie dog range classify the species in ways that encourage, subsidize, or authorize control activities. Although large areas of prairie dog colonies are essential to the highly endangered black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), surviving large prairie dog colonies are too few to recover ferrets. Numerous other species of birds and mammals that co-evolved with prairie dogs are also reduced as a consequence of reductions prairie dog abundance. In an effort to reverse these trends and to restore grasslands ecosystems, the National Wildlife Federation filed a petition to list black-tailed prairie dogs as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.