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Prairie dog champions dig in for bureaucratic battle

By Dave Philipps

The Western Slope cousins of Boulder's blacktail prairie dogs are heading to court to get more protection from the federal government.

The sagebrush-dwelling whitetail prairie dog is in a similar situation as its grassland cousin, the blacktail. Plague epidemics, habitat destruction and recreational target shooters have decimated the population. Whitetail colonies only cover about eight percent of their former range, according to the Center for Native Ecosystems in Paonia, Colo.

To try to protect the remaining rodents, a coalition of conservation groups and individuals, including author and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams, filed suit today to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to address the declining population.

Prairie dogs, both black and white-tailed, are critical foundations of healthy food chain, according to biologists. The quarter-pound ground-dwellers are the grassland equivalent of the McDonald's hamburger: everything from falcons to ferrets snack on them.

"If the prairie dog goes, so goes an entire ecosystem," Tempest Williams, author of "Refuge," warned.

Still, people haven't paid the prairie dog its due respect.

The shrinking population hasn't stopped recreational target shooters in Colorado from bagging up to 15,000 prairie dogs on federal lands in Colorado last year, according to the Center for Native Ecosystems, which brought suit against the service. And those who aren't shot are being driven out by development, the activists say.

A petition to protect whitetail prairie dogs under the Endangered Species Act, filed in 2002, forced the service to consider designating the subspecies as "threatened" or "endangered" but the service is now three months past its deadline for making the decision.

The Center for Native Habitat said that the government already has the proper scientific information for drawing up long-term recovery plans for the prairie dogs.

"The problem isn't a lack of knowledge," said Erin Robertson, staff biologist for the center. "We know how to stop degrading and destroying prairie dog habitat. The problem is the government's obstructionism and stonewalling."

However, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's problem may have more to do with dollars than dogs.

The budget for listing new species has decreased over the last decade, according to Native Ecosystems. The tight budget prevents the service from tending to all threatened species and it has to prioritize what species get listed.

Currently, Boulder's own blacktail prairie dog has even less of its original range than its lighter cousin. But rather than being on the endangered species list, or even the threatened list, it is on the waiting list.

Because it can't attend to every critter, the Fish and Wildlife Service ranks species according to perceived need. The blacktail currently has a listing priority of eight.

"Each year Fish and Wildlife goes through and assesses the candidates, but in the meantime, they have no legal protection," Robertson said.

Protecting the habitat of the whitetail may prove a lot easier than protecting its Front Range cousin. Unlike in Boulder, almost all of the colonies are on federal land, so private property owners wouldn't be put out.

However, if the suit against the Fish and Wildlife Service does succeed, the whitetail may just dig its way into the same bureaucratic netherworld as the blacktail.

Still, environmentalists are not buying the tight budget scenario.

"A preliminary finding on our listing petition will cost the Fish and Wildlife Service maybe \$10,000 or \$20,000," said Jay Tutchton, Staff Attorney with Earthjustice. "That's less than the people of Denver spend on pizza in an evening."