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## Protection Sought for the Vanishing Prairie Dog

By Brent Israelsen

The white-tailed prairie dog -- which once ranged through much of the Rocky Mountains -- is rapidly declining in population and needs federal protection to stave off extinction, says a coalition of environmental groups.

The coalition filed a lawsuit Monday in U.S. District Court in Montana, charging that the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) have ignored evidence proving the prairie dog merits inclusion on the endangered species list.

Federal intervention is necessary because the Western states and the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are doing little to manage the white-tailed prairie dog, said Erin Robertson, biologist for the Center for Native Ecosystems, a Colorado-based group leading the coalition.

Once ranging throughout the lowlands of the Rocky Mountain states, today the prairie dog is limited to about 800,000 acres in northern and eastern Utah, northwestern Colorado, western Wyoming and southern Montana. That acreage represents about 8 percent of its original range, said Robertson.

The white-tailed prairie dog is one of five prairie dog species in the western United States and northern Mexico. All of the species have experienced dramatic declines in population as a result of disease, suburban sprawl, grazing, oil and gas development, recreational shooting and poisoning by ranchers and farmers, who believe the critter is harmful to agri- culture.

Environmental groups, including the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, petitioned the FWS last July to determine whether the prairie dog should be studied for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

To date, the FWS has not answered to the petition, prompting the groups to file the lawsuit, which seeks to force the FWS to respond.

An FWS official in the agency's regional office in Denver was unavailable for comment Monday, but in the past, FWS has said it lacks money to respond in a timely fashion.

Robertson said many of the prairie dog's problems lie with the BLM, which manages most of the land on which the prairie dog resides.

"There is no pro-active management for prairie dogs," she said. For example, oil and gas drillers are allowed to bulldoze prairie-dog colonies without restriction.

States, too, are responsible for the decline, she said, because they allow uncontrolled shooting of prairie dogs, which are considered varmints by state lawmakers.

In Colorado, at least 15,000 prairie dogs were gunned down for sport last year.

"They are basically used as live targets for shooting practice," Robertson said.

White-tailed prairie dogs are shot for sport in Utah but in much smaller numbers, said Craig McLaughlin, mammals coordinator for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR).

McLaughlin took issue with Robertson's claim that the states are ignoring the prairie dog's decline.

A multistate task force, comprised of wildlife officers from Wyoming, Colorado and Utah, is meeting regularly to discuss the status of the white-tailed and Gunnison prairie dog species and to develop a plan to reverse their decline.

"We're hoping we can handle this without having to go into the federal [endangered species] listing process," McLaughlin said.

A report on the multistate task force's effort is now being penned by a Utah DWR biologist and should be released by summer. It likely will include a provision calling for the states to limit sport shooting of prairie dogs, McLaughlin said.

Concern over the prairie dog is based on biological studies indicating that it is a "keystone species," meaning that its survival is central to the health of the larger ecosystem.

Prairie dogs, which got their misnomer from early 19th century explorers Lewis and Clark, are the primary food source for the endangered black-footed ferret, which is making a slow comeback in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah. They also are food for eagles, hawks and other predators.

The burrowing rodent also plays a key role in aerating and mixing soils, contributing to a healthy, diverse range. That means, contrary to popular myth among ranchers, prairie dogs benefit grazing, both for wildlife and livestock.

Short of calling the prairie dog a "keystone," McLaughlin agreed it plays an important role in an ecosystem: "There is no question that the Utah DWR is interested in maintaining prairie dogs in the state."