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## Prairie dog deadline is near

Wildlife officials must decide on protection plan

**By Donna Kemp Spangler**

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Time is running out for federal wildlife agents to take action on ways to protect the white-tailed prairie dogs making their home in northeastern Utah.

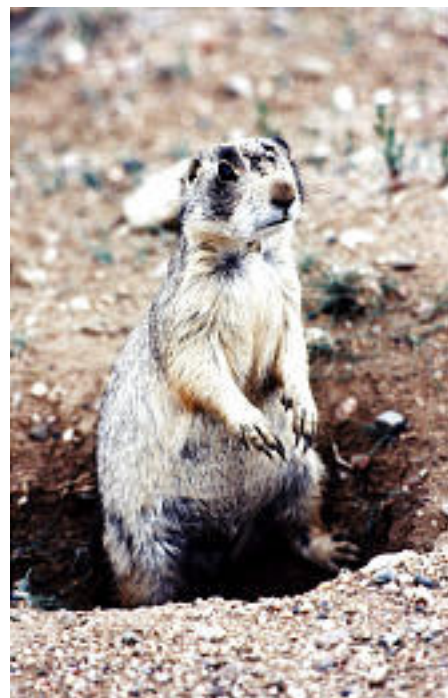
In a settlement agreement announced Thursday in U.S. District Court in Montana, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to a time line that is a direct response to a coalition of conservation groups' petition that seeks endangered species protection for the white-tailed prairie dog.

In 90 days, wildlife officials must issue a preliminary finding on whether the species should be listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. If so, then federal officials have a year to come up with a plan to protect the rapidly declining white-tailed prairie dog, which once scurried across the West.

Conservationists say the action has come a little too late, and the critters' demise has upset the balance of nature.

"Prairie dogs are absolutely essential to maintaining a healthy balance in nature that supports many species of native wildlife," said Gene Byrne, a retired Colorado biologist who headed that state's first black-footed ferret reintroduction in 2001. "Some species such as black footed ferrets cannot survive without prairie dogs."

It has been nearly two years since conservationists sought the protections. The coalition is led by the Colorado-based Center for Native Ecosystems, and it includes the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and Utah author Terry Tempest Williams.



The white-tailed prairie dogs make their home in northeastern Utah.

*Associated Press*

When the Fish and Wildlife Service failed to respond, the groups sued.

Protection under the Endangered Species Act would require the federal government to develop a long-term recovery plan for the species and its habitat.

The animals are a chubby rodent and a member of the squirrel family.

Conservationists say the white-tailed prairie dogs have vanished from at least 92 percent of their historical habitat, which once included western Wyoming, northwestern Colorado, northeastern Utah and south-central Montana. Prairie dogs provide food for badgers, hawks and eagles, as well as other animals.

Conservationists blame the demise of the white-tailed prairie dogs on oil and gas drilling, suburban sprawl and conversion of natural habitat to agricultural use. Sylvatic plague, a disease accidentally introduced to North America around 1900, also caused large prairie dog colonies to dwindle and disappear.

Utah has taken steps to protect the white-tailed prairie dog by adopting some shooting restrictions on public lands in the state. Still, conservationists say more needs to be done.

"If Colorado, Utah and Wyoming want to recover the white-tailed prairie dog and avoid Endangered Species Act protection, they must end target shooting of live prairie dogs, ban poisoning and protect important prairie dog habitat," said Erin Robertson, staff biologist for Center for Native Ecosystems.