

Prairie Dog Working Group (PDWG)
December 18, 2017
Open Space Mountain Parks Annex: 7315 Red Deer Drive

ATTENDANCE

Participants: Dan Brandemuehl, Kristin Cannon, Pat Comer, Elle Cushman, Aaron Cook, Deborah Jones, Keri Konold, Lindsey Sterling Krank, Amber Largent, Joy Master, Valerie Matheson, Andy Pelster, Carse Pustmueller, Eric Sims, Heather Swanson, John Vickery

Facilitation: Heather Bergman, Sam Haas

ACTION ITEMS

Heather Bergman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail all Prairie Dog Working Group (PDWG) members a handout with suggestions for how to write SMART goals. • Send out the contact information for all PDWG members.
All PDWG members	Review the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (available here), and the Urban Wildlife Management Plan (available here) and identify specific concerns.
Staff	Be prepared to present information regarding current goals/targets in existing plans and policies.
Any PDWG member planning to present a goal statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the SMART goals handout and formulate goal statements that meet the standards related to SMART goals. • Consult with other PDWG members who may not share your perspective. • Proactively address anticipated questions and concerns from other PDWG members. • Be prepared to present how the goal relates to current plans/policies. • Send goal statement(s) to Heather Bergman before the next meeting
Carse Pustmueller, Pat Comer, Deb Jones, and Joy Master	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet to rework the groups of guiding principles proposed by the PDWG and formulate ten guiding principles that capture the aim of each group. • Send the guiding principles to Heather Bergman by January 18.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The opening ten minutes of the meeting were dedicated to both verbal and written public comment. There were no public comments at this meeting.

DISCUSSION OF PHASE 2

Participants shared their thoughts about the proposed Phase 2 approach. Key themes from the discussion are captured below.

- There were questions about the amount of meeting time allotted to different tasks in the Phase 2 process proposal. Some participants were concerned that too much time would be spent agreeing to principles and goals, and not enough time would be spent exploring needed changes to plans and policies. Some PDWG members felt that there was not an adequate amount of time spent discussing and agreeing to changes during Phase 1, and they expressed a concern that the final step of Phase 2 would be rushed. There must be subgroup work accomplished between meetings to increase the efficiency of time spent together as a full group.
- Agreeing to overall prairie dog management goals for the City of Boulder may not take three meetings, but the guiding principles are critical because they are the goalposts for the conversation about policy changes. Discussing goals is also important because every suggested change to a policy made by the PDWG will have implications for other management objectives, so the PDWG must wrestle with those tradeoffs in an informed manner. All policy changes recommended by the group must be in service of the agreed-upon goals. It became clear during Phase 1 that PDWG member ideas merit discussion, which is why there are three meetings planned for presenting, discussing, and agreeing to goals.
- The PDWG will submit their Phase 2 recommendations to the City Manager who could potentially tell staff to make the recommended changes or bring the recommendations to City Council to decide whether to adopt the recommended changes. Council may pick and choose the changes they would like to implement.
- There were questions about staff's role in Phase 2 and whether they would be able to veto recommended changes to policies. Because the goal of Phase 2 is to recommend policy changes, staff will share the implications of the proposed recommendations on other management goals but will not be placed in the position of saying "no," as they often were during Phase 1, when the objective was to make recommendations that could be implemented in 2017, not to recommend changes to plans and policies.

BRAINSTORM GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT GOALS

PDWG members brainstormed guiding principles for future management goals and then sorted similar ideas into groups. The guiding principles serve as the rules of engagement for suggested prairie dog management goals.

Idea Group #1

- Resolve conflicts with other land uses and overcome challenges innovatively
- Be creative and innovative
- Use a decision-making approach that is flexible and adaptive
- Look at the broad picture to create something bigger than what there is today, and work with partners to create something
- Do not reinvent the wheel
- Minimize conflict between prairie dogs and irrigated land (also in group #6)

Idea Group #2

- Minimize lethal control
- Emphasize humane treatment of prairie dogs

Idea Group #3

- Make science-based, fact-based, and experienced-based decisions
- Listen to experts and knowledgeable prairie dog researchers
- Provide scientific citations when possible as context for ideas

Idea Group #4

- Ensure the prairie dog is (maintained) in its role as a keystone species
- Maximize conservation of the prairie dog ecosystem
- Increase prairie dog habitat
- Maintain ecological sustainability for the prairie dogs

Idea Group #5

- Accomplish different priorities on different lands
- Have a balanced prioritization of uses across the landscape
- Do not prioritize one use over the other
- Make sure that a system-wide approach is taken when considering goals

Idea Group #6

- Minimize conflicts with neighbors
- Minimize conflict between prairie dogs and irrigated land (also in group #1)
- Increase public awareness of the role of prairie dogs on the landscape and the complexity of prairie dog management
- Use coexistence strategies for living with prairie dogs

Idea Group #7

- Consider the full range of native ecosystems on City land
- Protect and increase/enhance native biological diversity

Idea Group #8

- Balance environmental, economic, and social sustainability principles in managing ecosystems
- Consider economic feasibility and transparency

Idea Group #9

- Follow federal regulations, but allow the PDWG to recommend legislative changes to state laws
- Manage within the City of Boulder Charter

Idea Group #10

- Have a transparency of alignment with City goals (in all the things)
- Be consistent, fair, etc., in the treatment of one another (including neighbors)

Group Discussion

The PDWG members asked each other clarifying questions about the proposed principles and discussed which guiding principles they can support and which would be better addressed through the goal discussion and/or the plans/policy discussion.

- PDWG members had questions about how to make the guiding principle about listening to experts clearer in terms of defining expertise. There is a difference between listening to and deferring to experts. The intention of this guiding principle is to ensure that goals are based in science and experience. PDWG members should be prepared to offer citations to support their goals.
- PDWG members had questions about whether the principle of minimizing lethal control was meant to fit within principles of native ecosystem management or whether the person who proposed the principle meant elimination of lethal control. The person who proposed the principle clarified that they meant minimization, not elimination of lethal control.
- Given that prioritization of uses is an ongoing challenge, the intention of the guiding principle about considering different priorities on different lands is to clarify that certain areas may be prioritized for prairie dog management and other areas may be prioritized for other management objectives, such as irrigated land. The goal is to consider the entire ecosystem. In general, staff at Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) strive for balance and take a system-wide approach in terms of priorities.
- The City of Boulder Charter can only be changed with a public vote. Section 76 in the Charter specifies OSMP protocols.
- PDWG members had questions about the intent of the principle about maintaining prairie dogs as a keystone species. The word “maintain” may convey that the PDWG does not intend to pursue strategies to increase or enhance prairie dog populations.
- PDWG members discussed the term “adaptive management.” Some felt that pursuing adaptive management strategies would be limiting and may stymie creativity and innovation, and others saw adaptive management as an effort to continually reevaluate processes and approaches. PDWG members discussed the importance of committing to measurement and agreed to change the principle to “use a decision-making approach that is flexible and adaptive.”
- Some may interpret the guiding principle about taking a system-wide approach as implying that prairie dogs are not needed in certain areas if they are abundant in other areas. However, the intention of this guiding principle is to clarify that there may be some place-based decisions, and there may be times when prairie dogs take priority on certain lands and times when other goals take priority.
- PDWG members had questions related to the guiding principle about protecting designated irrigated land from prairie dog occupation. Some felt that protection of irrigated lands is more of an outcome/goal than a guiding principle, and others thought that it was important to specify that prairie dog occupation and irrigated lands are often in conflict. The PDWG

agreed to change the principle to: “minimizing conflict between prairie dogs and irrigated land.”

DISCUSSION OF VALUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

PDWG members listed the values they would like to consider when assessing goals for prairie dog management. When goals are presented, PDWG will think about how the goals impact the values below.

- Agriculture/grazing
- Mixed grass prairie
- Xeric tall grass prairie
- Black tailed prairie dog
- Prairie dog associate species
- Mesic bluestem prairie
- Neighbors
- Stakeholders
- Community
- Weeds
- Climate change
- Science
- Humanity (how we interact with wildlife and each other)
- Water/drought
- At-risk species
- Exotic disease (plague)
- Feasibility
- Soil
- Recreation
- Habitat (coexistence)
- Fire
- Funding

PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT PROPOSED GOALS

PDWG members began the process of proposing and discussing the benefits and challenges of new overall prairie dog management goals. Goal statements are indicated in italics with group discussion below.

Successful prairie dog management in the City of Boulder means a plague-free and interconnected population of prairie dogs in the Southern Grasslands habitat that is healthy but naturally kept in check by a viable population of black-footed ferrets.

- The reintroduction of the black-footed ferrets has been discussed but is not currently an official goal of the City of Boulder.
- According to the ferret recovery team, the Southern Grasslands is the only place in the city with a large enough area to accommodate a viable population of the black-footed ferret.

- This goal relates to the idea of creating a stabilized population of prairie dogs that is not subject to getting wiped out by plague on an annual basis. Achievement of this goal may require a plague management plan to avoid the large fluctuations in populations.
- There are several communities in Colorado that have reintroduced the black-footed ferret, including Sandstone in Fort Collins, private properties in Pritchett County, and the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. Some black-footed ferret colonies are thriving and some are not.
- A sub-goal of this proposed goal could be to “increase the number of receiving sites, particularly in areas like the Southern Grasslands.” Achieving this sub-goal would require a reexamination of occupancy rates, thresholds, and vegetation criteria.
- This goal relates to the Phase 1 recommendation to define a successful relocation. The City should not spend money on a relocation if there is no assurance of colony survival.

Create large complexes of prairie dog colonies that are also supported by stepping stones or smaller colonies throughout the system.

- There is no acreage target associated with this goal yet, but the idea is to create large complexes across the entire landscape, not just on City land.
- It may be possible to consider using predator species other than the black-footed ferret, such as the long-tailed weasel, to stabilize the prairie dog population.

Successful prairie dog management in the City of Boulder means having a number of receiving sites within or outside Boulder County to keep up with the demand.

- The intent of this goal is to include both governmental and non-governmental properties.
- There may be issues with transporting prairie dogs across county lines, and achievement of this goal may require approval from the County Commissioners.
- It may be possible to petition to change the legislative agenda to address the rule pertaining to county lines, which is in Senate Bill 111.

Outline a set of strategies for raising public awareness of the complexity of prairie dog management and the ecological importance of prairie dog colonies in the larger ecosystem context, providing on-going learning opportunities, keeping the public informed about current practices and policies, and providing the public with strategies for living with and next to prairie dogs.

- Achieving this goal will require defining indicators for success and framing it as an outcome so that it is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. One suggestion for revision is: “Establish management policies that proactively reduce human/wildlife conflicts and sustain ecological integrity.”
- OSMP has an educational division that can help define the target audience.

Develop an innovative program (such as a conservation/mitigation fund) to mitigate and offset prairie dog relocation activities.

- Any landowners hoping to utilize City receiving sites should be required to pay. If they choose not to pursue relocation of the prairie dogs on their property, they should be required to pay a mitigation fee.

- Currently, when the City agrees to take prairie dogs from a private property, the landowner pays for the relocation and the staff time. They may also be subject to a loss of use fee. Consideration of payment into a ‘conservation fund’ for use of public lands as a receiving site should be discussed.
- If landowners create a loss of prairie dog habitat, that should be offset through a mitigation fee that is funneled back into grassland conservation.
- If the PDWG wants to propose an overarching goal pertaining to prairie dog conservation, it is important to define what is meant by “conservation” and specify the amount of habitat and the percentage of public land they would like to see used for prairie dog conservation. The Grassland Plan has specific acreage targets.

Figure out when certain priorities trump other priorities on a site-by-site basis.

- Achieving this goal will require identifying key priorities and areas where a change in designation could significantly contribute to prairie dog conservation.
- It is important to consider all potential perspectives/impacted parties (e.g., people who care about recreation, plants, pollinators, etc.), and ask: “How would this plan look if it was written with them in mind?”
- There was discussion among PDWG members about the prioritization of sentient beings (i.e., prairie dogs and other animals) over vegetation and other non-sentient values.

NEXT STEPS

- All PDWG members should review the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (available [here](#)) and the Urban Wildlife Management Plan (available [here](#)), and then identify specific concerns. Appendix D of the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan details the viability criteria (acreage/percentage targets for prairie dog populations).
- At the next meeting, the PDWG will review the goals and targets in existing plans and policies. Staff should be prepared to present this information at the January 25 meeting.
- Any PDWG member planning to present a goal statement at the next meeting should plan to address any concerns and questions of other PDWG members during the presentation of their goal, and should be aware of how their goal relates to current plans and policies. PDWG members should strive to write goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely (SMART). Consultation with other PDWG members who may not share a similar perspective is also encouraged.
- Any PDWG member planning to present a goal statement at the next meeting should send their goal to Heather Bergman before the meeting.
- Heather Bergman will e-mail all PDWG members a handout with suggestions for how to write SMART goals.
- Carse Pustmueller, Pat Comer, Deb Jones, and Joy Master will meet to rework the groups of guiding principles proposed by the group and formulate ten guiding principles that capture the aim of each group. Heather Bergman or Sam Haas can make room reservations or set up conference calls if needed. The subgroup will send the guiding principles to Heather Bergman by January 18.
- Heather Bergman will send the contact information for all PDWG members.