

**Prairie Dog Working Group
January 25, 2018
OSMP Annex (7315 Red Deer Drive)
MEETING SUMMARY - FINAL**

ATTENDANCE

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

Facilitation: Heather Bergman, Sam Haas

Peak Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send out a Doodle poll to find times in March, April, and May for the replacement meeting. • Include time on the next meeting's agenda to discuss reactions from PDWG members on the self-guided driving tour.
Aaron Cook	Find and email the location for the February 5 meeting to Heather, and Heather will send the information out to the group.
All PDWG members	Send goals to Heather so that she can send them to the group for consideration during their February 5 meeting.
Carse Pustmueller	Rewrite the language about augured burrows in the Phase 1 Report and send it to Heather.
Heather Swanson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send information about the licensing and restrictions for the use of the vaccinet to the Prairie Dog Working Group (PDWG) members. • Send self-guided driving tour information when it is ready.
Joy Master	Send the group information about the number of Parks and Recreation acres that the Urban Wildlife Management Plan does not include.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The first ten minutes of the meeting were dedicated to both verbal and written public comment. Each person was allowed three minutes to speak. The individual comments are summarized below.

Wes Dixon

Dixon is a Boulder resident and working with Lindsey Sterling Krank at the Prairie Dog Coalition has opened his eyes. He is glad to know that the City is addressing prairie dog management collaboratively. He would love for Boulder to leave a legacy of conservation and sound prairie dog management plans, as well as for the City to do their best to create win-win situations.

Francis Morris

Morris lives in Gunbarrel. While driving down Jay Road or 63rd Street, she is aware of the prairie dogs and wonders how they survive, as it is mostly dirt in those areas. She considers herself a prairie dog advocate. She does not believe in the use of lethal methods or in harming any sentient being. She would like to find a way to avoid killing prairie dogs.

STAFF UPDATE ON VACCINE AND DRIVING TOUR

Heather Swanson provided updates on the collaborative effort with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) to use the plague vaccine. She also provided information about a newly developed prairie dog driving tour. Action items are indicated in italics.

Yersinia Pestis (Plague) Vaccine Proposal in the Southern Grasslands

- Swanson met with Dan Tripp, a wildlife disease researcher for CPW, at the end of December. The vaccine is now conditionally licensed, and it is no longer experimental. This development removes the requirement to write a research proposal for the use of the vaccine.
- In 2018, Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) will obtain sufficient *amounts of Yersinia pestis* vaccine to vaccinate all currently occupied areas in the Southern Grassland Preserve (90 acres) during two time periods (summer and fall). The only changes to the recommendation are that there will be two applications instead of one and it is no longer part of a research study. The City can still monitor different indicators.
- *Heather Swanson will send the Prairie Dog Working Group (PDWG) members the information about the licensing and restrictions for the use of the vaccine.*

Prairie Dog Driving Tour

- PDWG members have discussed the benefit of taking people to OSMP land to see prairie dogs. Swanson has worked with her staff to develop a self-guided driving tour that uses Google Maps so that people can see the route and the different recommended stops. When the user clicks on the stop, it shows photos and information. During the winter months, it is easy to see the hole openings, but it is not possible to see the landscape or underlying vegetation.
- The stops that were selected represent the whole spectrum of prairie dog sites, and they are all in active use. There are three stops, all in the Grassland Preserves. Some have had issues with adjacent landowners, and some have not. There are three different routes: an eastern route, a southern route, and a northern route. There is also a standalone stop at Valmont Park. The user will be able to choose from four different links, each with several stops. All locations are City of Boulder properties, and all but Valmont Park are OSMP properties.
- *Heather Swanson will send the information about the self-guided driving tour when it is ready.*
- *The agenda for the next meeting will include time to address questions or concerns about the tour.*

AUGURED BURROW RECOMMENDATIONS

There were some lingering concerns about the language used in the draft Phase One Report regarding the use of augured burrows for prairie dog relocation.

- One member of the PDWG understood the previous agreement to be that prairie dogs would not be released into augured holes during relocation except when needed as starter burrows with staff approval. They stated a concern that some of the language about augured burrows is contradictory. One sentence says, "In most cases, augured burrows will not be used for the release of animals." The second sentence says, "while not the preferred method, augured burrows may be used with staff permission if soil conditions, and/or geographic conditions are adequate." This issue would benefit from additional clarity.
- PDWG members remember discussing how augured burrows will not be used to release animals but how they have proven to be useful as starter burrows. The group considered that in some areas there might be areas with soil that would make augured burrows appropriate and it may be helpful to keep them as an option in case there is a time when the use of augured burrows would be acceptable.
- It could be helpful to clarify in the Report that the goal is to release prairie dogs into a suitable burrow and the use of augured burrows could be considered with new technology. *Carse will rewrite the language in the report to reflect this group conversation.*

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

A subgroup of PDWG members worked together between meetings to refine the guiding principles that the PDWG brainstormed at the last meeting. The PDWG discussed the refined guiding principles and made several suggestions for improvement. The purpose of the guiding principles is to provide a touchstone for the group to refer to when they discuss proposed prairie dog management goals.

Guiding Principle #1: Secure greater ecological sustainability of prairie dog habitat and viable populations so prairie dogs can provide their keystone function

- Land managers sometimes claim that prairie dogs in urban areas are not used as a keystone species. The PDWG must agree that prairie dogs are a keystone species, regardless of whether they are in an urban area.
- The sub-group discussed quantifying the security of greater ecological sustainability (e.g., habitat protection, etc.), but decided that the guiding principle should remain broad.
- *The group agreed to keep this guiding principle as it is.*

Guiding Principle #6: Use humane treatment and minimize lethal control of prairie dogs

- Some PDWG members expressed a concern that the word "minimize" is not strong enough and would like to clarify that the focus should be on expanding non-lethal means.

- The PDWG has heard from some members of the public who will not accept lethal control and others, primarily adjacent landowners, who do not support the no-kill concept.
- The use of words such as “expand,” “improve,” or “increase,” are not specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timely (SMART), but may work as guiding principles because they set a general direction. Some members of the PDWG expressed a concern that these words seem to assume that the current efforts are inadequate or not trending in the right direction. Other members of the PDWG thought that words such as “expand,” or “improve” provide guidance and aid the thought process and development of concrete goals.
- The group should be mindful of the possibility that they may develop goals and then realize that the current effort is satisfactory. Also, if the City discovers that their use of humane treatment has reached a point where it can no longer be improved, or they find that they have exhausted their humane treatment options, the City would like to make sure that they have not violated the guiding principle. The sub-group discussed this concern and decided that there would likely always be room for improvement. The sub-group initially used the word "emphasize" instead of "expand." Some PDWG members expressed concern that the word “emphasize” implies that using the methods is a choice.
- The importance of expanding knowledge about humane treatments should be emphasized. Rather than saying that all previous efforts have been insufficient, it should be clear that the group values moving toward continuous education about methods.
- It is important to remember that the group will only use these guiding principles to develop sound goals. The principles will not be turned into a policy.
- *The group agreed to change the guiding principle to: “Use and emphasize humane treatment of prairie dogs and non-lethal means as the priority method to control prairie dogs.”*

BOULDER COUNTY PRAIRIE DOG MEETING

PDWG members who attended Boulder County staff’s informative session about 2017 prairie dog management offered their key takeaways from the meeting.

- It was eye-opening to listen to farmers who have struggled to make a living because prairie dogs have occupied their land. They have had to use lethal control to manage increasing prairie dog populations even though they would prefer to use organic means. The soil in the south end of Boulder County is not good, and many of the burrows have collapsed. The meeting was civil given the diversity of perspectives present (i.e., landowners, farmers, conservationists, etc.). The most significant takeaway is that it is important to do a better job controlling prairie dogs in the north and expanding prairie dog occupation in the south.
- The County relocated 86 prairie dogs last year and fumigated over 17,000 burrows. One of the County’s goals is to reintroduce black-footed ferret by 2020, but they did not have any quantifiable benchmarks. County staff said that they would work on integrating benchmarks into their timeline.

REVIEW OF EXISTING GOAL STATEMENTS IN CURRENT CITY PLANS AND POLICIES

Staff presented the goals and strategic targets relevant to prairie dog management in current City of Boulder plans and policies. PDWG members reviewed and discussed the goals and identified specific concerns. The March 5, 2017, staff presentation from the PDWG meeting summarizes the relevant plans in more detail. The presentation from this meeting is available [here](#).

Boulder Parks and Recreation

- The Parks and Recreation department's mission does not have the same focus as OSMP's mission. The Parks and Recreation Department promotes the health and well-being of the community by collaboratively providing high-quality parks and programs. The department does not have language specific to prairie dogs in their commissions. The Parks and Recreation Master Plan specifies that department's focus is on financial sustainability, youth engagement, building community relationships, and organization/readiness. Multiple objectives must be balanced on all Parks and Recreation land. Parks and Recreation also follows the Urban Wildlife Management Plan and the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan.
- When Parks and Recreation land reaches prairie dog occupancy capacity, they work with OSMP to find places for relocation. For example, Valmont Park (a Parks and Recreation property) has an approved development plan and 50 acres of prairie dogs.
- Parks and Recreation owns some land around the Boulder Reservoir and has used those for relocations in the past, as the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan states it is a critical wildlife habitat. Parks and Recreation has approximately 500 to 600 acres of prairie dogs. Many of those acres are designated removal areas. The Urban Wildlife Management Plan identified the conflict colonies (e.g., Valmont, Foothills).
- *Joy will send the group information about the number of Parks and Recreation acres that are not included in the Urban Wildlife Management Plan.*

Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan

- The Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan provides an overarching plan for the City. Other master plans fall under the Comprehensive Plan. Comprehensive Plan goals allow for the development of policies, which produce work items for staff.
- Natural environment goals listed in the Comprehensive Plan are to protect native ecosystems and biodiversity, enhance urban environmental qualities, protect geologic resources, and sustain and improve water and air quality.
- Boulder County is governed by the Boulder Comprehensive Plan (different from the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan).
- The Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan designates areas. Some of the areas designated as developable land have prairie dogs on them, so the suggestion would be to move them to agricultural land.

Urban Wildlife Management Plan

- The purpose of the Urban Wildlife Management Plan is to establish a set of policies and guidelines for managing wildlife within the City of Boulder. One of the goals of

the Urban Wildlife Management Plan is to "establish wildlife management policies and practices that proactively reduce human/wildlife conflicts, reflect overall community values, and sustain ecological integrity." The overarching prairie dog management goal is to consider all the colonies and identify which ones have the opportunity for long-term preservation, which should have intermediate protections, and which conflicts cannot be mitigated.

- There are two chapters related to prairie dogs in the Urban Wildlife Management Plan. However, the goals are vague. For example, one of the goals is to "provide a clear and easily understood framework for balancing social, environmental, and economic goals when managing wildlife on public and private lands."
- The Urban Wildlife Management Plan does not apply to Open Space land in Boulder County.
- Several statements in the Ordinance Policy do not align with practice. For example, there is a policy that states that people who want to kill prairie dogs can either get a lethal control permit or apply to relocate them. However, when there are a few prairie dogs left after relocation the City can give a special use permit to allow lethal control to be used on the residual or non-trappable prairie dogs. That process is not transparent. There is also language about ensuring there is "adequate" infrastructure after prairie dogs are removed so that they do not return. The term "adequate" is not well-defined in this context.

OSMP Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan

- The goal of the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan is to simultaneously conserve eight conservation targets within viability ratings (which should also result in conserving nested species). The goals for prairie dogs may impact OSMP's ability to meet these other targets.
- The viability criteria set SMART goals for the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan. The goals for prairie dog conservation are:
 1. System-wide prairie dog occupancy between 800-3137 acres
 2. At least 70% of prairie dog occupied acres occur in Grassland Preserves, Prairie Dog Conservation Areas, or Multiple Objective Areas.
 3. All three grassland preserves with occupancy of prairie dogs between 10-26% of total area
 4. At least four prairie dog colonies with nesting burrowing owls in any year
 5. At least 50% of prairie dog colonies with territorial horned larks
 6. Presence of at least one species of generalist predator on at least 50% of colonies and presence of at least one species of specialist predator on at least 25% of colonies

Agricultural Land

- OSMP has a goal to lease 80% of its irrigable land to protect its water rights portfolio from abandonment and to support local agriculture. OSMP has approximately 6,600 acres of irrigable land. The irrigable land is ditch irrigated, and the water is difficult to move from one parcel to the next. The department also has a goal to maintain agricultural leases on 12,000-16,000 acres to support agricultural

activities and to be able to use livestock grazing as a tool to manage grassland ecosystems.

- Conflicts related to prairie dogs on agricultural land typically revolve around the irrigated parcels. Currently, nearly 2,000 acres of agricultural land is populated by prairie dogs, almost 29%.
- If a prairie dog colony plagues out on an agricultural property, the City will begin to put the land back into agricultural production after verifying that the burrows are not occupied.

Clarifying Questions

PDWG asked clarifying questions about the staff presentations. Questions are indicated in italics, followed by the response.

Is there an incentive for lethal control applicants to use humane methods?

Applicants first pay an administrative fee (\$1,500) to process the application. The City does not return this fee. Applicants then pay a mitigation fee, which is reimbursed if they use humane lethal control methods. It is not cheap to kill prairie dogs humanely.

What is the City's process for receiving and processing emergency requests of complaints from residents?

The PDWG could develop a goal to "address every resident complaint within 30 minutes of the original call," and explain details about communication tactics, outreach, and staff allocation. Or the PDWG could develop a goal that lays out how the City would manage emergency situations in the future.

How did OSMP staff reach the threshold of 10 to 26% occupancy?

OSMP staff reached this threshold largely through professional judgment. There are 800 acres in total, and staff looked at historical occupancy to understand the long-term trends of the landscape. This analysis included looking at historical recovery rates, which were approximately 40% per year at the time the thresholds were set.

What are the primary components of the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan that the PDWG should reconsider?

The implementation of many of the goals is challenging. For example, when occupancy is below 10% and OSMP would like to relocate prairie dogs, there are mechanisms to do so. However, capacity is an issue. The City has also stated the goal of taking prairie dogs from transition or removal areas, but that is not how it has played out because the City has only taken prairie dogs from private or non-agricultural properties. Unfortunately, the City has barely made any progress on the goal of removing prairie dogs from agricultural properties on Open Space.

Is there an upper limit placed on prairie dog population expansion (i.e., if the populations continue to grow every year)?

The Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan states that if the prairie dog population is at or above 26% and the City is not meeting other vegetation goals, OSMP can consider removal

options. OSMP has never done that. There are several nested species, such as grasshopper sparrows, who would cease to exist if prairie dog occupancy reached 100% capacity. Prairie dogs do practice their own methods of population control, including infanticide and abortion.

What type of OSMP land is included in the designated 800 acres?

Half of the grassland is forested. The three grassland preserves are the areas with grassland and are suitable for prairie dog habitat.

What is the annual income from agricultural leases for the City?

The City currently earns approximately \$150,000 from agricultural leases. Open Space places this money into the general fund; it is not allocated to a specific project. The City is reviewing lease rates this spring. It may be worth considering ways to use some of these funds to build moveable fence barriers around agricultural land to decrease relocation needs by decreasing conflicts between prairie dogs and landowners/lessees.

The criteria for the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan have been in place for seven years. Is it a good time to revisit the criteria underlying the goals? Updating the criteria may lead to reprioritization and influence system-wide goals.

It is always worth looking at the criteria, but the thinking behind the creation of the criteria has not changed. OSMP has the same commitment to agricultural conservation. However, it may be worth adding criteria about conflicts with adjacent landowners, as there are currently no strategies to address that.

PRESENTATION OF NEW PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT GOALS

PDWG members proposed new overall prairie dog management goals for the Working Group to consider. PDWG members asked clarifying questions related to the proposed goal statements.

Goal 1: The City, in partnership with neighboring public and private landowners, has restored and maintained an interconnected network of high-integrity grasslands that support viable populations of disease-free prairie dog colonies. These prairie dog colonies are naturally controlled by viable populations of black-footed ferret and other native predators.

- There are many objectives associated with this goal. The goal statement is about outcomes, and the objectives listed are quantifiable measurements to help achieve the outcome. There should then be milestones set for each goal to address timing.
- This goal is ecological, primarily focused on the sustainability and viability of prairie dog habitat.
- One of the objectives of this goal is to "update City of Boulder grassland parcel prioritizations and management designations." This update process could be an ongoing or periodic process. Given that there are 148 colonies on OSMP land, it may not be feasible to inventory and prioritize every colony, but it could happen at a broader level.

Goal 2: Landowner conflicts associated with prairie dogs have been minimized to negligible levels, and citizen awareness has increased about prairie dog roles in the City of Boulder's grassland ecosystems.

- This goal is about addressing conflict and increasing awareness among residents of Boulder. Raising awareness is critical to conflict minimization.
- It is important to widen the citizen awareness beyond the City of Boulder and into Boulder County.

Goal 3: The City has implemented a sustainable process that provides resources and capacity to support prairie dog conservation goals.

- This goal is about the sustainability of the entire prairie dog management process.
- The structure and resources for the process must be in the right place. For example, there must be staff capacity to assist with the increased community engagement.

PDWG Discussion

- In general, PDWG members liked both the approach and content of these goals. They liked the idea of having an overarching goal and supporting objectives, as long as the objectives articulate strategies to reach the goal.
- In terms of reprioritizing colonies by types (Prairie Dog Conservation Areas, multiple-use areas, grasslands, etc.), it might be helpful to reprioritize the general categories, not every colony. The goal would be to look at the current categories and then prioritize what staff actively manages for, depending on the parcel of land. For some parcels, the prairie dogs should be the priority. Instead of having a blanket policy for all lands, each parcel should be viewed as separate entities that have different policies, implementation strategy, and goals. The Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan lays out some of priorities on different City land (specifically, pages 108-109).

Goal #4: Work to remove state legislative barriers to prairie dog relocation to support black-footed ferret reintroduction throughout the state of Colorado within five years.

- The Prairie Dog Coalition has a long-term strategy for Senate Bill 99-111. Passing prairie dog legislation in Colorado without agricultural support is difficult. Ultimately, the Prairie Dog Coalition would like to quantify black-tailed prairie dog habitat to identify conservation opportunities.
- With this incentive program, developers could use the quantification tool to measure the value of the habitat. A landowner in a priority area for conservation of grassland species could create a net gain, and the developer could purchase the landowner credits. Hopefully, this incentive program would get agricultural interests on board to support prairie dog legislation and to offer their land as receiving sites.

Goal #5: Secure viable, sustainable, and healthy prairie dog populations and ecosystems, including a large-block ecosystem on the Southern Grasslands having plague-free and interconnected populations of prairie dogs and a viable population of black-footed ferrets by reprioritizing parcels of land where prairie dogs occur and creating targeted and individualized policies for each parcel while considering the City's many land use needs, and by implementing sub-goals.

- Several members of the PDWG worked to develop this goal, and it was an inclusive process. This goal has nine sub-goals to support the overarching goal. The draft sub-goals are not prioritized by importance.
- *The goal should clarify that the plague-free areas are within the Southern Grasslands, not system-wide.*

PDWG Discussion

- Some of the sub-goals could benefit from more specificity. For example, the sub-goal about creating and implementing proactive and non-lethal strategies to reduce conflicts could be interpreted as a statement that no lethal means will be used. This statement should be clarified.
- One of the sub-goals is: "Amend the Wildlife Protection Ordinance to focus on non-lethal options." This sub-goal seems like a one-time task. Tasks that need to be completed to achieve goals should be placed in a different bucket.
- One of the sub-goals is: "Develop active and effective partnerships with federal, state, and county landowners adjacent to the Southern Grasslands to help create a large-block prairie dog ecosystem." *The group agreed to include private landowners in this sub-goal.*
- Wherever there are sub-goals to "expand" or "increase" prairie dog habitat, it is important to provide a quantifiable percentage or number to make the sub-goal measurable. Occupancy percentage should be reflected in the goal.

NEXT STEPS

The PDWG agreed to the following next steps. Action items are indicated in italics.

- The PDWG agreed not to meet as a group on February 5 and to find a different time between now and May to schedule a meeting. Any PDWG member who would like to meet on February 5 from 5:00 – 9:00 PM can meet to revise and condense the prairie dog management goals that were presented during this meeting.
- *Peak Facilitation will send out a Doodle poll for times in March, April, and May for the replacement meeting.*
- *Aaron Cook will find and e-mail the location for the February 5 meeting to Heather, and Heather will send the information out to the group.*
- *All PDWG members who would like the sub-group to consider their proposed goal should send their goals to Heather so that she can send it to the group for consideration during their February 5 meeting.*
- *Carse Pustmueller will rewrite the language about augured burrows in the Phase 1 Report and send it to Heather.*