

Controlling black-tailed prairie important issue for Wyoming

By *Bob Shoemaker*

Ranchers and other land managers in Platte, Goshen, Natrona, and Converse counties have implemented programs to manage black-tailed prairie dogs in areas where they are damaging agricultural lands.

Each prairie dog consumes up to two pounds of forage per month. This means that 400 prairie dogs consume as much as a cow and calf per week.

The drought in eastern Wyoming combined with large black-tailed prairie dog populations and other factors have resulted in thousands of acres reduced to near desert conditions. Prairie dogs can be extremely destructive to rangeland causing soil erosion, cheatgrass infestations, and severe reductions in forage production of the land. An example of this can be seen along Interstate 25 in the large prairie dog towns



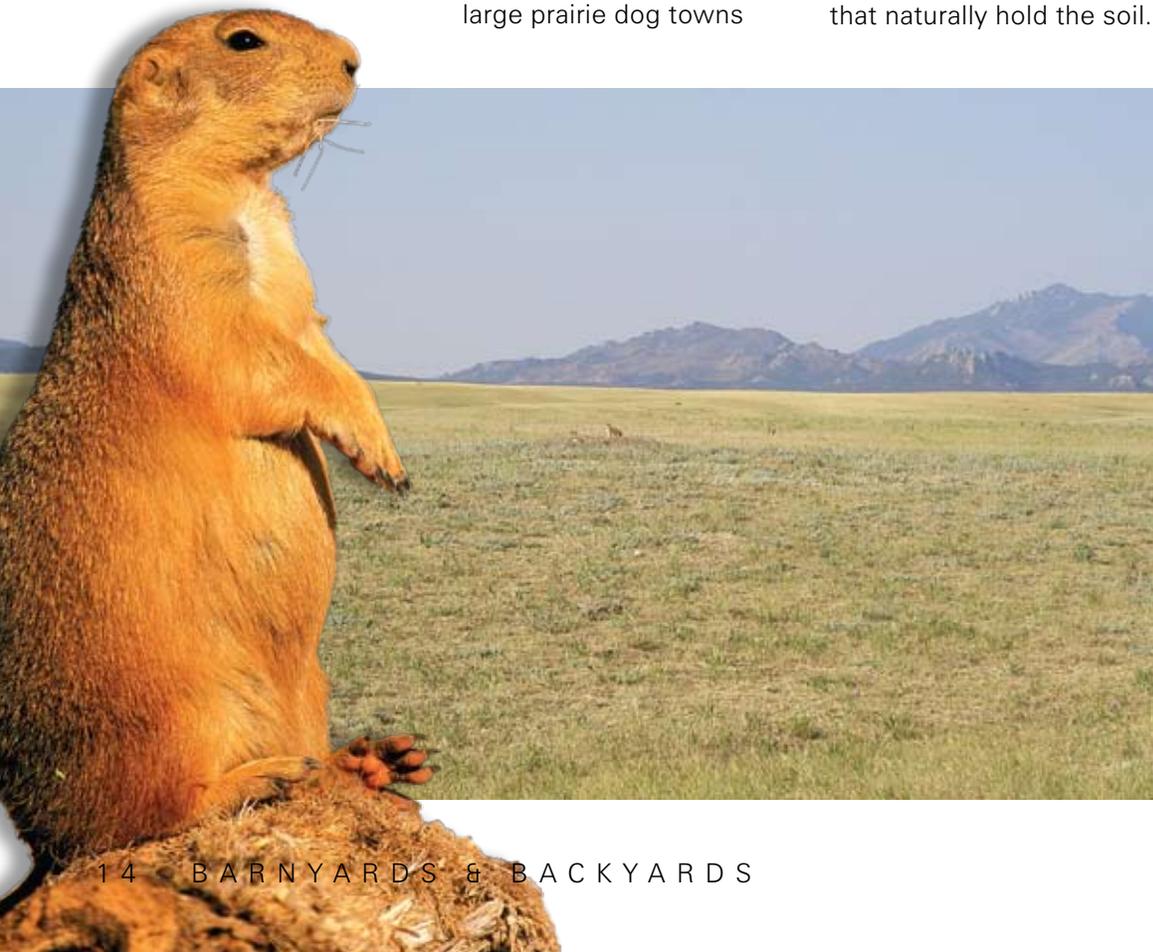
extending from Glendo to Casper. On a windy day, an enormous dust cloud can be seen that is formed by soil wind erosion caused by prairie dogs eliminating the grasses that naturally hold the soil.

Prairie dogs have reduced much of this land to where it has little value for other grazing wildlife and livestock.

Converse County has been faced with significant populations of prairie dogs. Skip Lewis, Converse County Weed and Pest Control District supervisor, estimates he has seen a 20-percent increase in the population of prairie dogs in the last four years in some areas of Converse County. He adds sylvatic plague is sweeping through prairie dog populations in areas of the county, and numbers are declining as a result of this naturally occurring disease.

Prairie dogs live in colonies, commonly called "towns," that may reach hundreds of acres in size. They make a barking sound, which probably led to this rodent being called a prairie dog instead of a squirrel or gopher. Their burrows contain the parents and up to eight young, which are born from April through June.

Prairie dog towns can expand in size at



dogs landowners



an alarming rate if a management program is not in place. I have been working with landowners for 25 years, and prairie dog towns we intend to treat are measured in April and early May. When treated in September, the majority of the towns have grown by 10 percent or more. Thousands of acres that were valuable grass pastures 10 years ago are now supporting only prairie dogs and a small collection of other wildlife species. Burrowing owls, rabbits, snakes, black-footed ferrets, mountain plovers, and other wildlife species benefit from prairie dog towns; however, most wildlife lose both habitat and forage

Ranchers are normally a very independent group of individuals. Both Goshen and Converse counties had public meetings to discuss prairie dogs, and each of the two meetings attracted nearly 100 participants.

Small-acreage landowners need to be good neighbors and good stewards of their land. If you have black-tailed prairie dogs, the state's weed and pest control districts recommend developing management programs,



Prairie dog towns can be very destructive to rangelands.

and cost-share agreements can often be worked out. Contact information for your nearest district is at www.wyoweed.org/wp_dist.html. If you don't have prairie dogs yet, monitor your property for new prairie dog burrows.

What control options are available? Commercial applicators specializing in prairie dog control are available for hire. Contact a local weed and pest office to find applicators who work in your area. If you decide to do your own control work, you will need a private or commercial applicator's license to purchase and apply the pesticides. All the pesticides licensed for prairie dog control are restricted-use products and require an applicator license. Information on how to obtain a license is available from University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service offices. Contact information is at <http://ces.uwyo.edu/Countries.asp>.

Choosing the best control option depends on the size of the town, the time of the year, weather conditions, and the past control history of the town. Collaborating with neighbors will give the best long-term results.

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