

# Thunder Basin National Grassland Cooperative Working Group

June 7, 2017

## Welcome and introductions

Attendees: Matt Avery, Shane Walker, Bill Lambert, Andrew Litzel, Quade Schmelzle, Will Rose, Michelle Huntington, Cheryl Schwartzkopf, Tony Lehner, Slade Franklin, Marty Ertman, Brad Rogers, Zack Walker, Joe Budd, Jennifer Hinkhouse, Rick Miller, John Hartung, Hale Redding, Lacey Sloan, John Midkiff

## Results from Meeting 2 (Jessica - presentation on TBNG website)

- Next learning workshop August 23

## Black-footed ferrets (Zack)

- Historical overview
  - 1981 – rediscovery, thought extinct
  - Captive breeding program began at Sybille Canyon
  - Thunder Basin, Shirley Basin, Meeteetse were under initial consideration for reintroduction sites
  - 1991 – first ever ferret reintroduction site in US, population still extant
  - Reintroductions in other areas were stalled because they weren't covered under 10-J
  - 10-J now covers entire state; allows for ferret “take” provided activities are legal
  - WGFD now takes lead on ferrets given cooperation with other agencies
  - 2016 – ferrets released in Meeteetse, will release supplemental ferrets in 2017, conducting plague control
- Thunder Basin
  - Still remains a good site for ferrets: good prairie dog population
  - WGFD is not currently supporting the release of ferrets into TBNG because of social issues
  - Want to make sure that each reintroduction site has support
- Ferret recovery plan
  - Will recommend more reintroduction sites (without specific location recommendations)
  - Currently working on recovery plan, will send out for review
- Questions
  - What's the timeline for review on the ferret recovery plan?
    - Hope to finish report this summer
  - How long will WGFD not support it?
    - Until social issues are resolved

## Prairie dog management and field tour (Shane)

- County working maps from last meeting are being shared with the grazing associations to get suggestions for control priorities
- Target of 10,000 acres for lethal control in 2017 using combination of federal appropriated and Conservation Practice (CP) funds from the grazing associations
- Spring Creek GA will not use CP funds, Thunder Basin and Inyan Kara GAs will use CP funds (totaling \$50K)
- \$130K for USFS control this year

- Trying to streamline contracting through counties, would rather manage agreements than contracts
  - counties can get a cheaper rate than USFS
  - allocating funds is easier through agreements
  - downside: easy for either party to walk away from an agreement, contract requires 5-year commitment
- Wyoming County Commissioners Association had a field tour with regional forester
  - Short-term goals: dusting for plague, increased target for lethally treated acres of prairie dogs,
  - Evaluating areas for supplement feeding, cactus control, Rozol use
  - Long-term actions: evaluating plan amendment for ferrets
    - Would need to be revised under 2012 planning rule
    - 2012 tackles issues at larger scale, with less detail and greater flexibility
    - Question: Does old plan need to be updated to meet 2012 guidelines before being amended? (Yes?)
    - Why would folks like to see a plan amendment?
      - To address boundary control
      - Remove, reduce, or change scope of “viability”
      - Reduce number of acres of prairie dogs
      - Ferrets taken out of plan
      - Grassland restoration
    - Question: Will opening plan to revisions affect management actions this fall?
      - Probably not, amendment not likely to be initiated this summer
    - Regional office is reviewing amendment for ferret plan regarding NEPA, timeline, and staffing needs
- Forest supervisor retiring in July, acting supervisor has been appointed
- Reflections on working group
  - Approve of cooperation that is happening amongst stakeholders
  - Progress has been slow, but starting to see positive outcomes
  - Setting foundations for future
  - Now is an opportune time to make progress
  - Governor’s office is supportive of the continuance of this group
  - Group may change composition of group based on needs and topics
  - What is point of this group if USFS decides to do plan amendment?
    - Discuss broad range of issues
    - Create consistency, open communication and learning, streamline decision-making, achieve more as a team

**Process and purpose of working group** (Jessica – presentation on website)

- Suggestion: Add restore and maintain grazing
- Made some changes to proposed “purpose and process” statements
- Example: Platte Valley adaptive management plan

**Proposal by conservation organizations** (Kristi Bly – World Wildlife Fund, Jonathan Proctor and Chamois Anderson – Defenders of Wildlife)

- Non-lethal prairie dog management opportunities (presentation on website)
- Tasks: fundraise and provide assistance for non-lethal management, find areas of agreement
- Potential methods
  - Translocations, collapsing burrows after removal (when below objective)
  - Vegetative buffers, portable electric fences during grazing

- Has been used effectively in Conata Basin, South Dakota and other areas
  - Visual/physical barrier fences (expensive and time consuming) at small scales
  - Ferrets and other natural predators – help reduce prairie dog densities
    - Assistance programs available for private landowners maintaining prairie dogs and introducing ferrets, minimum of 1,500 acres (multiple landowners can combine)
    - Coyotes probably eat a lot of prairie dogs too
    - Hawks and swift foxes eat prairie dogs less frequently
    - Example, Haverfield Ranch in Kansas
  - Consolidate lands
- Looking at reducing cactus
- Comments: remove prairie dogs, then cactus, then reseed to mitigate erosion
- Want to plan ahead and also work on prevention to reduce reactive management
- Fiddleback: spray cactus, 3-year plan, coal mines suggesting treat cactus and then they will seed for grass, conservation groups plan to try fencing and pay for maintenance
- Question: How long did it take to see success with vegetative barriers?
  - Same year on Turner Ranch with good rain
- Question: What would be an effective veg barrier in TBNG?
  - Would have to adapt size of veg barriers
- Question: How can we compensate landowners for grazing opportunities lost through fencing/veg barriers?
  - Didn't cut AUMs in other areas, can work with landowners on this in agreements
- Question: How is market value of land in exchanges determined?
  - USFS has to take into consideration all values to determine fairness of swap
  - This process is intentionally rigorous to prevent large-scale consolidation of federal lands

### **Non-lethal and lethal considerations** (Slade) – presentation on website

- Lethal rodenticides
  - First generation anticoagulants break down quickly and take multiple applications
  - Fumigants, gas bombs (applied to limited areas)
  - Zinc phosphides
  - Not all products can be used year-round, have to be licensed to use most
  - Can result in deaths to non-target species (e.g., birds, horses)
- Other lethal methods
  - Concentrated CO2 delivery to burrows
  - Raptor perches
  - Shooting
  - “Rodinator” – combustible gas in burrows
  - Vacuums
- Non-lethal
  - Fencing: requires construction and maintenance
  - Vegetation barriers: study conducted in South Dakota
  - Translocation: WGFD has a policy on this, includes this in definition of control
- Unconventional
  - Planting castor beans near burrows (didn't work)

### **Disaster relief information** (Joe)

- Farm service agency (FSA)
  - <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/disaster-assistance-program/index>

- Emergency livestock assistance program (ELAP)
  - \$125K total limit, eligibility based on weather
- Non-insured crop disaster assistance program
  - Does not include wildlife damage
- Doesn't think that these programs will cover losses from prairie dogs
  - Secretary could declare it a disaster, but unlikely
- Pasture, rangeland forage (PRF) insurance
  - <https://www.rma.usda.gov/pubs/rme/prfinsprog.pdf>
- Might be worth following up with FSA in Casper

### **Finalize charter**

- Charter was edited by the group

### **What should be included in an implementation plan?**

- Goals for 2017 – working under existing forest plan and strategy
  - USFS/Weed & Pest get grants and agreements signed by August 24<sup>th</sup> meeting
    - USFS wants dollars allocated ASAP, preferably in July
    - Boards need to meet and agree
    - USFS creates agreement
    - Money can be obligated
    - USFS will create GIS map with CWG-identified prairie dog treatment areas
  - Restoration on 4W
    - cactus control
    - Weston Co. range improvement cost share available by August
    - Coal company donation for range improvement on grassland
      - Grow grass, juniper removal for sage grouse habitat improvement
- Question: How to keep IDT from stalling progress?
  - IDT doesn't need to be involved in contracts or agreements
  - IDT has to mitigate impacts to other species
- Goals for 2018 – look at broader scope
  - For next spring, USFS needs a minimum of 6 months for restoration projects

### **Next time**

- Go through seven issue categories to identify options for implementation by USFS and other land managers and entities in break out groups
- Vegetation barriers – possible locations with best chance of success and how “success” would be measured
- Invite written comment of private landowners
- Possible areas for future restoration (USFS, TBGPEA, Lacey)
- Vote on charter