



USDA Forest Service  
Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests  
& Thunder Basin National Grassland  
*Briefing Paper*

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## **Grassland Restoration and Prairie Dog Colony Management – Short and Long Term Implementation Activities**

### **Summary:**

The Forest Service has convened coordination meetings and site visits with grazing associations, state agencies, county weed and pest organizations, permittees, land owners and NGO's in order to develop a shared understanding of issues regarding prairie dog colony management on the Thunder Basin National Grassland. The intent is to provide a foundation for a collaborative environment to cultivate short and long-term solutions to prairie dog colony impacts on the Grassland. The Forest Service is encouraging groups to work together to develop management alternatives for the agency to consider, which will be durable and provide for the long-term success of the Grassland.

Several short and long term actions have been taken or are in the planning stages:

### **Short term management (FY17-18)**

Approximately 5,200 acres of lethal control (rolled oats with zinc phosphide) were authorized in September 2017 and are currently being implemented by Campbell, Converse, and Weston County Weed & Pest Districts. Areas designated for treatment were identified by the grazing associations and local land owners and informed by information gathered in 2017 at the Thunder Basin Collaborative Learning Series Public Workshops and the Cooperative Working Group meetings. The Forest Service contributed \$135,000 to agreements for these colony control efforts. As cooperating partners, the Wyoming counties contributed approximately \$108,000, in cash and in-kind, to the prairie dog control efforts.

An additional 1,100 acres of lethal prairie dog control were completed by private contractors in October of 2016. Funding for this work (\$60K) was provided by the Forest Service as part of a larger FY16 contract that included both lethal and non-lethal control methods.

Non-lethal control activities and other proposed projects have also been informed by information gathered at the Thunder Basin Learning Series Public Workshops, the Cooperative Working Group meetings, and grazing association meetings. Specifically, a proposal for construction of non-lethal fencing in the Fiddleback Allotment was included in the 2016 contract but has not yet been implemented.

Noxious/invasive weed spraying of approximately 26,000 acres covering the Thunder Basin National Grassland, as well as state and private lands, is planned over a five-year period, beginning in the spring of 2018. This work will be completed through two instruments. The first is through a cooperative agreement established in April 2017 with Converse County Weed & Pest District and funded by the Forest Service (approximately \$90K). The second is through a grant (approximately \$450K) provided by Forest Service State and Private Forestry to the Wyoming Department of Agriculture in partnership with Converse County Weed and Pest District. Both of these instruments were part of a larger \$1 million grant provided by the Forest Service to the State of Wyoming for grassland and sagebrush restoration. Control efforts will target cheatgrass and other noxious/invasive species such as cactus, juniper and salt cedar. Treatment areas will be identified by partners on an annual basis and will include a review of prairie dog mapping efforts, extent of plague impacts, and resulting rangeland health conditions. The five-year implementation timeline will also provide time for mapping of prairie dog colonies to be completed and will make sure that treatments are designed to decrease invasive species and increase perennial grasses and forbs in order to be as effective as possible in meeting restoration objectives on affected lands.

The ban on shooting black-tailed prairie dogs in Management Area (MA) 3.63 on the TBNG was rescinded in March of 2017 for one year. Additionally, dusting for plague was discontinued based on feedback received during a trip to the Thunder Basin by Forest Service leadership in May 2017. The Forest Service will re-evaluate decisions regarding the shooting ban, as well as dusting for the plague during the spring of 2018.

Three Grassland restoration projects were authorized by the Forest Service in October 2017 in coordination with the Thunder Basin Grazing Association. These projects are already underway or scheduled for implementation:

- Seebaum cactus spraying (3,000 acres costing approximately \$75k);
- Fiddleback cactus spraying (1,900 acres costing approximately \$40k); and
- 4W rangeland improvement project (approx. 30 acres with in-kind labor and equipment)

In addition to these short term management actions, on-going monitoring of the current plague epidemic is occurring in coordination with Weed & Pest Districts, Wyoming Department of Health, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association. Information gathered will be used to inform future management actions regarding prairie dog colony management on the Thunder Basin National Grassland.

#### **Long term management (FY18 and beyond)**

The Forest Service has signed individual agreements with Campbell, Converse, and Weston County Weed & Pest Districts for lethal and non-lethal prairie dog colony control efforts through Dec. 2018. The Forest Service will pursue modifications to the terms of the agreements this year, which will hopefully lead to additional years being added to the agreements.

Based on input from public and intergovernmental working group meetings in 2017, the University of Wyoming Ruckelshaus Institute will be compiling a report of implementation/action ideas for Grassland restoration and prairie dog colony management. This report will be produced after the December 2017 meetings and can be used by the Forest Service and other land managers in northeast Wyoming to plan for FY18 and beyond.

The Forest Service will continue to work closely with the Thunder Basin Working Group, and other public interests and groups, regarding long term management strategies. This may include collaboratively establishing the need for a potential grassland plan amendment. The potential need will be developed by information received from multiple sources, including the Thunder Basin Working Group, as required by the 2012 Planning Rule.

The Forest Service will aggressively implement prairie dog control on boundaries and use all of the existing tools in the current grassland plan and explore other tools in cooperation with the Thunder Basin Working Group while we are assessing the need for a plan amendment.

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