

4.4.4 Habitat and Species Preservation and Management – City Lands

Notwithstanding any negative aspects associated with the presence of black-tailed prairie dogs in specific situations, two important facts remain: (1) it is a species of special importance to a large portion of the citizens of Longmont, and (2) it can attract and sustain use by some wildlife that might otherwise not occur, or at least not at the same abundance, in a given area. Included among the latter are species of special concern such as the bald eagle, ferruginous hawk, and burrowing owl.

Therefore, preservation of prairie dogs on some City lands was identified as desirable and important during focus group meetings. The City should undertake a periodic (biannual) inventory of the location, size (area and estimated population), and ecological attributes of prairie dog colonies on City-owned lands. Ecological attributes include shape, presence or proximity of trees for raptors, prevalent plant species and condition, proximity to major roads, proximity to areas of intensive human use (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, and recreational facilities), and potential for controlling offsite dispersal. Based on information collected during the periodic inventory, the City should then classify each colony into the following management categories:

- Preserve – Avoid projects that would impact the colony, to the degree practicable. Allow the colony to continue to function as at present. If the colony dies out due to sylvatic plague, leave the burrows intact to allow for future natural colonization. Alternatively, use the empty burrows following a sylvatic plague die-off (after a waiting period of at least 1 year) as a release site for prairie dogs that must be removed from other City lands or from lands being developed by private parties. In the intervening period, control weeds that may invade (e.g., by mowing or spraying with a chemical herbicide) and, where desirable vegetation is sparse, seed with an aggressive perennial grass to provide a temporary cover and improve conditions prior to recolonization or release of prairie dogs.
- Actively Manage/Replace – Same as Preserve, except that (a) barriers may be used to minimize offsite dispersal, (b) perch sites (poles) may be installed to attract raptors, and (c) hides (blinds) may be installed to aid hunting by carnivores. If the colony dies out due to sylvatic plague, retain the empty burrows for future natural recolonization or use them (after a wait of at least 1 year) for relocation of prairie dogs from other City lands or from lands being developed by private parties. Some intervening weed control or grass seeding may be required.
- Actively Manage/Exclude – Same as Actively Manage/Replace, except that if the colony dies out due to sylvatic plague, destroy the burrows by discing or chiseling (“plowing”) and revegetate with perennial grasses (native or non-native, depending on the intended future use. If other prairie dog colonies exist nearby, the revegetated area may need to be protected by a barrier (vinyl fence or other) to help prevent unwanted recolonization. This category would apply to colonies in areas considered inappropriate for prairie dogs or where their presence conflicts with a higher priority use, but where the situation does not need short-term action.
- Remove – Applies to colonies in areas not considered appropriate for prairie dogs or where their presence conflicts with a higher priority use, and for which the need to remove the prairie dogs is more immediate than for Actively Manage/Remove. Types of removal are listed below.
 - Relocate – Used when relocation to another site is a viable option. See Section 4.4.3 regarding regulatory compliance. Section 4.5.1 discusses the reason that relocations of prairie dogs—if done properly—are fundamentally different from relocations of the other problem wildlife described above.

Relocation from City land should occur during the period June through October if practicable to avoid the fall/winter season (November through February, when relocations may be less successful due to cold weather and snow cover, and the spring birthing/nursing season (March through May). Prior to release, the captured prairie dogs should be dusted for fleas as a means of reducing the potential for transmission of sylvatic plague, in conformance with requirements of the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

Relocation should not be used in situations involving the need to remove fewer than 25 prairie dogs from a single area. This provision reflects the lower survival associated with small relocations as well as the disproportionate administrative and fiscal burden for the City as well as the Colorado Division of Wildlife in relation to the ecological and societal benefit.

- Remove/Euthanize – Same as Relocate, except that removed prairie dogs are donated to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service black-footed ferret recovery program or an approved raptor rehabilitation program as a food source. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has found that ferrets raised on prairie dogs for food fare better following release than those raised on other types of food. Note that captured animals are euthanized before being fed to the ferrets or to raptors.

If this method is used, the City should retain the services of a professional or qualified volunteer organization to capture and transport the animals to the designated location.

The City should also ensure that the removal is performed as humanely as possible, given the limitations of the method employed. If the March-May birthing/nursing season cannot be avoided, use of a chemical fumigant (aluminum phosphide) or asphyxiant (carbon dioxide) should be used to dispatch any young prairie dogs not removed by the trapping or other removal method.

- Exterminate – Same as Remove/Euthanize, except that prairie dogs are euthanized in their burrows with the use of a chemical fumigant (aluminum phosphide) or asphyxiant (carbon dioxide). This option should be used only as a last resort.

Any plan to exterminate prairie dogs on City land must first be approved by the City Manager after being provided with information on the size and location of the colony, the number of prairie dogs affected, the reasons for the proposed extermination, the other options considered, and the reason(s) the other options were deemed infeasible or impracticable. If extermination is used, the City should retain a professional prairie dog exterminator or use a qualified staff member who has spent at least 5 days assisting a professional.

The order of priority for removal of prairie dogs from City lands should be as follows:

- Preferred Option – Relocation, if the number to be removed is greater than 25 animals and a suitable release site has been identified, approved by the Colorado Division of Wildlife and City Council, and the public given adequate notice.
- Second Option – Removal for donation to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service black-footed ferret recovery program or raptor rehabilitation program OR extermination within the burrows. The choice among these two should be based on criteria such as urgency, cost, and the express need for euthanized animals for ferret recovery or raptor rehabilitation programs.

The City should notify the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment in the event of any prairie dog die-off on City land potentially associated with sylvatic plague and should cooperate in obtaining samples for epidemiological evaluation. If plague is confirmed in a prairie dog colony on City land, the City should cooperate with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment in implementing a program to dust the affected area for fleas to eliminate or control the outbreak and provide public notice in accordance with State guidelines. The City should also comply with any State requirements related to monitoring for monkey pox.