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October 1, 2009

Katherine Richardson
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
2369 West Orton Circle, Suite 50
West Valley City, Utah 84119

Sent via FAX
Original by USPS

Dear Ms. Richardson:

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) represents 23 states and Canadian provinces, spanning from Alaska to Texas and Saskatchewan to Hawaii - an area covering nearly 3.7 million square miles of some of North America's most wild and scenic country, inhabited by over 1500 premier wildlife species. WAFWA is a strong advocate of the rights of states and provinces to manage fish and wildlife within their borders. The Association has been a key organization in promoting the principles of sound resource management and the building of partnerships at the regional, national and international levels in order to enhance wildlife conservation efforts and the protection of associated habitats in the public interest.

I am writing in response to your June 29, 2009, request for relevant information on the status of the white-tailed prairie dog (WTPD). I will provide an update on the conservation efforts associated with the WAFWA *Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation and Management of Species of Conservation Concern Associated with Prairie Ecosystems* (MOU), which was implemented by WAFWA in January 2006. This MOU, which is commonly known as the WAFWA Grassland Initiative (WGI), is WAFWA's vehicle for beginning the transition towards an ecosystem management approach (i.e. prairie) in the western Great Plains and guides conservation efforts by the states and their partners. With the current conservation and management efforts in place and being implemented, protection under the Endangered Species Act is not warranted for this species.

In 2006, WAFWA completed an assessment for the WTPD and developed a companion conservation strategy (see attached). In these documents, WAFWA identified six objectives for the WTPD. They were: 1) promote conservation of WTPDs and Gunnison's prairie dog and their habitats; 2) reduce the risk of over-utilization of these prairie dog species for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; 3) identify research needs; 4) focus use of existing regulatory mechanisms to maintain species viability; 5) reduce the risk of other factors affecting the continued existence of these prairie dog species; and 6) increase landowner participation in conservation efforts by minimizing impacts from lost management options.

POPULATION STATUS, DISTRIBUTION, TRENDS AND HABITAT

As identified in the WTPD Assessment, the WTPD occupies the third largest geographic range within the genus *Cynomys*. They inhabit intermountain basins, open shrublands, semi-arid to arid shortgrass steppes, and agricultural lands in Utah, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. Their gross range occurs from extreme south-central Montana (0.9% of range), south through Wyoming (62% of range), extending into western Colorado (21% of range) and eastern Utah (16% of range). The gross range of the WTPD encompasses 20,224,807 ha (49,974,813 ac). The gross range of this species is thought to have changed little since historic times, but occupied habitat and population densities probably declined within the last century. While the states have monitored WTPD in the past, it was sporadic and they used varying survey techniques. Since the initiation of the WGI, the states within the range of the species have been implementing methods more conducive to identifying population trends across a large landscape.

In 2008, Colorado and Utah surveyed WTPDs and used a survey method developed and tested by the Colorado Division of Wildlife, in conjunction with Colorado State University. This method is commonly referred to as occupancy modeling survey. As a result of having the survey method being developed in Colorado, two cycles of surveys have been completed for WTPDs. Percent occupancy did not change significantly between 2004 (24.1%) and 2008 (23.1%).

For Utah, the occupancy rate was 46%, which is higher when compared to Colorado. The difference may be because Utah defined WTPD range more broadly. In total, Utah had about 12,000 occupied plots and Colorado had about 11,000, which is not that different. Precision for the two states was almost identical (SE ~1000 plots).

In 2007, Wyoming began selecting survey quadrants with the objective of implementing the same survey method as Colorado and Utah. However, the survey protocol was costly and not compatible with aerial survey methods. As part of Wyoming's evaluation process, data on presence and status of colony was collected for analysis. This pilot study enabled Wyoming to develop an alternative approach using aerial photos and aerial surveys to develop a robust estimate of occupied area with confidence intervals. The technique follows statistical measures developed by Cochran (1977), Skalski (1994) and Bowden et al. (2003). In 2008, Wyoming flew 600 quadrants (500m X 500m), estimated area occupied within each quadrant, and evaluated the status of each colony present. .

In Wyoming, WTPD colonies were present on 272 quadrants (68%), which is higher than Utah and Colorado. There were 206 quadrants (76%) that had colonies that extended beyond the quadrant. Of the 272 colonies overlapping quadrants, 228 (84%) were classified as healthy. Additional WTPD colonies were recorded within 1,500 m of the 600 quadrants 64% (256) of the time. The mean size of quadrants in the high stratum was 24.97 ha (61.71 ac) and the mean in the low was 24.86 ha (61.43 ac). Quadrants in the high stratum had a mean of 3.68 ha (9.1 ac) WTPD colony area while those in the low stratum had a mean WTPD colony area about half (mean = 1.68 ha [4.15 ac]). The habitat model used (Seglund et al. 2006) estimated potential habitat for the WTPD in Wyoming to be 27,822,847 ac (11,511,356 ha). For 2008, Wyoming estimated that there were 2,893,487 WTPD colony acres (95 % CI: 2,372,597 to 3,414,377 colony acres).

Montana is at the northern edge of the distribution of the white-tailed prairie dog. Current known acreage of white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana ranges between 118 acres and 366 acres in 10-11 colonies. To ensure occurrence within Montana, a proactive relocation effort for WTPD has been implemented between the various cooperators, which includes the Bureau of Land Management.

In 2006, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), together with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) which proposed to translocate WTPD for the purpose of augmenting or re-establishing an historically occupied colony site on BLM lands in Carbon County, Montana. WTPD occurrence is within the following area: that portion of Carbon County where Highway 212 crosses the Wyoming state line, then north along it to the junction with Highway 72 at Rockvale, then south along Highway 72 to Edgar, then east along the Edgar to Pryor Road to the Crow Reservation boundary, then south and east along the Crow Reservation boundary to Bighorn Lake, then south along the west shore of Bighorn Lake to the Wyoming state line, then west along the Wyoming state line to its junction with Highway 212, the point of beginning. Translocation efforts began in 2007 and continued into 2009. Mapping proceeded into 2009 to evaluate progress. The remainder of 2009 will be directed toward assessing the status of WTPD throughout Montana, filing reports for various permits, keeping partners apprised of activities, and preparing for efforts in 2010.

It has been asserted that numerous activities are impacting WTPD habitat. Those activities include oil and gas development, agricultural conversion, and off road vehicle use. While many of these activities can impact WTPD at a local level, monitoring across the entire range does not indicate a major threat to the long-term persistence of the species and their habitat. It should be noted that more site-specific information on WTPD populations are collected in association with black-footed ferret reintroduction efforts to monitor natural variation on a year-to-year basis. Agencies can address management issues at a local level as they arise and this information serves as an indicator on the health of the species across a state. Studies have shown prairie dog species are dynamic on a year-to-year basis.

Although different methods are being used by the states for monitoring, all survey methods indicate a stable range-wide WTPD population. They continue to persist across the entire historical range, despite numerous localized impacts. In general, WTPD populations continue to be widespread and appear to be much less fragmented than those of the Gunnison's prairie dog. In conclusion, population monitoring does not identify present or threatened destruction, modification or curtailment of habitat or range of the species.

DISEASE OR PREDATION - PLAGUE MONITORING

It is likely that plague is the most important factor that could adversely impact prairie dog species range-wide. Plague continues to be documented in various areas across the West in all prairie dog species. WTPDs have been found to experience slower rates of transmission and less consistent population declines (85% - 96%) than other prairie dog species. Impacts appear to be local or impacting only about 50% of a complex and widespread die-off was not documented in 2008. It is also important to note that wildlife and land managers are monitoring for the presence of plague, and in the case of ferret reintroduction areas, try and mitigate for the impacts of plague.

The presence of plague in the Wolf Creek WTPD complex, which is used in black-footed ferret recovery efforts, was confirmed in flea pools and a desert cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus audubonii*) carcass collected in 2007, and in flea pools and a WTPD carcass collected in 2008 (K. A. Griffin and M. W. Miller, unpublished data). In an effort to retard and manage the impacts of plague on the Wolf Creek complex, deltamethrin was applied to ~369 hectares (~ one half) of the core black-footed ferret recovery area in September and October of 2008. Deltamethrin was applied to the remaining ~471 hectares of the core black-footed ferret recovery area in April, May and June of 2009.

This plague outbreak is allowing the Colorado Division of Wildlife to conduct a study on the use of insecticide to control plague outbreaks in local WTPD populations. Two treatments (Fall 2008, Spring 2009) and two non-treated control colonies are being used in this study. Colorado will be comparing flea community composition, abundance and prevalence on colonies treated with deltamethrin in the Fall of 2008 to colonies treated in the Spring of 2009. Two non-treated control colonies of ~325 hectares each are also being sampled for comparison to the treatment areas. The control colonies are adjacent to the treatment colonies and are comprised of similar habitat. This study will provide important information regarding the timing (Spring versus Fall) of the most effective application of deltamethrin in relation to the seasonality of flea species diversity and abundance. On-host and off-host (i.e. burrow) flea abundance and prevalence are being monitored after deltamethrin application to examine the length of the time that treatments suppress flea survival. The remaining states are not reporting any large scale die-offs associated with a plague epizootic.

Although there are other diseases, such as tularemia, that affect individuals in a population, large scale die-offs impacting thousands of acres of prairie dogs has not been documented by monitoring.

WTPDs are a prey species for many predators including black-footed ferrets, hawks, eagles, badgers (*Taxidea taxus*), and coyotes (*Canis latrans*). Monitoring does not indicate predation is a significant impact to the species.

Although the WTPD is susceptible to plague and other diseases, the dynamics of outbreaks in WTPD colonies, as in other prairie dog species, is not fully understood. Consistent monitoring by the states and their partners allow for the identification of disease outbreaks. When feasible, implementation of management actions, such as dusting, reduces the impacts of the disease to the species. In conclusion, population monitoring does not indicate disease or predation rising to the level of a threat for the species.

OVERUTILIZATION FOR COMMERCIAL RECREATION OR SCIENTIFIC PURPOSES

While all the states allow for a level of take of WTPDs for recreational and scientific purposes, impacts to populations are monitored by the state wildlife agencies.

Shooting closures for WTPDs have been implemented year-round in Coyote Basin, Utah, to improve black-footed ferret habitat. In 2003, a seasonal shooting closure from April 1 to June 15 was implemented on all public lands throughout the state of Utah. In Colorado, shooting closures

are in place on public lands from March 1-June 14. These closures are in place to protect females during the breeding and whelping seasons.

In 2007, the Montana Legislature failed to maintain the previous dual designation of prairie dogs as both 'nongame wildlife in need of management' and 'vertebrate pests' [Fish, Wildlife and Parks (87-5-101, MCA et seq.), Department of Agriculture (7-22-22, MCA et seq.)]. Thus, prairie dogs are currently classified only as 'vertebrate pests' (rodents) for the purpose of forming rodent control districts under the Department of Agriculture (MCA 80-7-1101), but only during those times 'when they are injurious to agriculture, other industries or the public.' The current status of prairie dogs also allows MFWP to manage prairie dogs in a manner that is consistent with its authority to manage for nongame wildlife (87-5-101, MCA et seq). Therefore, during those times that prairie dogs are not injurious to agriculture, other industries or the public, prairie dogs can be managed as nongame wildlife by MFWP. Conservation organizations in Montana are working to regain the dual status of black-tailed and white-tailed prairie dogs during the upcoming 2010 legislative session.

Population monitoring, especially in Shirley Basin, Wyoming, has not indicated an impact of shooting to WTPDs in that state.

Shooting has the potential to locally reduce population densities and could slow or preclude recovery rates of colonies reduced by plague or other disturbances by being an additive factor to mortality. Conversely, if shooting can be managed to regulate populations and maintain them at a threshold density, it may be a useful management tool for prairie dog conservation.

Other uses for scientific or commercial purposes are insignificant and do not rise to a level of threat for the species. In conclusion, population monitoring does not indicate overutilization of the species as a result of commercialization, recreation, or scientific purposes and the identification of this factor as a threat to the species.

INADEQUACY OF REGULATORY MECHANISMS - STATE REGULATIONS

All the states within the range of the species have the ability to regulate the take of the species either through their wildlife agency or their Department of Agriculture. Shooting restrictions have been put in place by two states on public lands to protect females during the breeding and whelping season.

In conclusion, population monitoring does not indicate inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms rises to the level of a threat for the species.

OTHER NATURAL OR MANMADE FACTORS - POISONING

As settlement of the Intermountain West occurred, prairie dog species became the focus of widespread eradication campaigns as a result of their reputation as range and agricultural pests (Clark 1989). The Biological Survey initiated systematic prairie dog control programs in 1915, and by 1919, cooperative poisoning campaigns had begun in all 4 states where the WTPD occurs. In portions of their range, the WTPD was specifically targeted for eradication. After the 1970s, some toxicants (e.g. strychnine and 1080) previously used for prairie dog control were banned, and although prairie dog control continues today, it occurs at a reduced rate with less

effective toxicants. Data presented in the Conservation Assessment indicate that poisoning is mostly a threat near cultivated or irrigated agricultural areas.

In conclusion, population monitoring does not indicate poisoning rises to the level of a threat to the continued existence of the species.

In closing, due to the increasing or stabilizing population trend information, management actions to reduce impacts of plague, incentive programs promoting grassland conservation – which includes prairie dogs, and the demonstration of the states' ability to regulate take through shooting, a not warranted finding on the WTPD status review would be the most appropriate determination. As demonstrated for the past 10 years, WAFWA states within the range of the WTPD remain committed to leading the multi-state conservation effort for prairie dogs, other grassland associated species, and the habitats they depend upon to survive. This partnership has promoted on-the-ground conservation efforts enhancing grassland wildlife populations. If you have any questions about information contained in this letter, please contact Bill Van Pelt, WAFWA's Grassland Coordinator at 623-236-7573.

Sincerely,



Larry L. Kruckenberg
WAFWA Secretary

Attachments (3)

cc: WAFWA Directors
Pete Gober, South Dakota Endangered Species Office
Bill Van Pelt, WAFWA Grassland Coordinator