

Making Forest Service History, One Prairie Dog at a Time!

The Thunder Basin National Grassland in Wyoming is making Forest Service history. In a first-of-its-kind effort, the Forest Service is trapping and relocating black-tailed prairie dogs. “The prairie dogs are encroaching on private land and will likely be poisoned to reduce conflicts with private land owners concerned with the spread of sylvatic plague,” explained Misty Hays, acting District Ranger on the Douglas Ranger District of the Thunder Basin National Grassland. In 2001, sylvatic plague swept through the area and although no transmission cases have ever been reported, the Forest Service is proactive in relocating the dogs to reduce the need for lethal control.



From left to right, Jonathan Proctor (Defenders of Wildlife), Misty Hays (USFS), Kristy Bly (World Wildlife Fund), and Lindsey Sterling-Krank (Prairie Dog Coalition, HSUS) work together to transfer a trapped prairie dog.

Relocating the prairie dogs began with a dusting process to relieve them of the plague. Each prairie dog hole was “dusted” with an insecticide, which targets fleas who carry the plague. Following many dusting treatments, traps were set to capture the prairie dogs and move them to a protected area within the National Grassland. The area is designated for future black-footed ferret reintroduction.

Relocating the prairie dogs is a crucial step in restoring habitat for the endangered black-footed ferret. Ferrets depend heavily on large prairie dog colonies for food and shelter. A ferret reintroduction was planned for the area in the early 2000s, but the plague devastated the prairie dog colony and delayed ferret reintroduction.



Prairie dogs waiting to be relocated within the National Grassland .

This summer the U.S. Forest Service, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Defenders of Wildlife, The Humane Society of the United States, World Wildlife Fund, and Biodiversity Conservation Alliance have teamed up to relocate 554 prairie dogs and increase habitat in a black-footed ferret recovery zone. “We would like to see black-footed ferret reintroduction as early as 2011,” said Hays “The first step will be successful relocation and a healthy prairie dog colony.”