



News Release

USDA Forest Service
Cibola National Forest and Grasslands
Kiowa/Rita Blanca National Grasslands
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For Immediate Release

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Rita Blanca National Grasslands Selected as a Prairie Dog Research Site

Clayton, NM – July 2, 2013 – Two black-tailed prairie dog colonies on the Rita Blanca National Grasslands in Dallam, Texas have been selected as research test sites for the second phase of a new vaccine to prevent Sylvatic Plague in prairie dogs. The Rita Blanca is one of 19 sites selected to test the vaccine, which was developed to reduce the high mortality rate among prairie dog colonies exposed to Sylvatic Plague.

Prairie dogs are considered a “keystone species,” because many other species that live in the grassland habitat rely on them for food and shelter. Having a healthy prairie dog population will benefit species such as the mountain plover, ferruginous hawk and burrowing owl. It could eventually lead to the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret on the Rita Blanca National Grasslands, which is part of its historic habitat.

The research will require closing Units 21, 22 and 77 on the Rita Blanca National Grasslands to hunting until the three-year study is concluded. The prohibition includes shooting, shooting at, pursuing, taking, attempting to take, catching or killing black-tailed prairie dogs. The closure order and maps have been posted on the Cibola’s website under the Alerts and Warnings section: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/cibola>.

The Sylvatic Plague Vaccine (SPV) was developed by USGS National Wildlife Health Center in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin. A plague vaccine program will enhance prairie dog and ferret recovery efforts, reduce pesticide use on public lands, allow managers to balance land use needs (agricultural and development), with conservation efforts on other sites and reduce the need to close public spaces due to plague.

The Rita Blanca National Grasslands, the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Texas Wildlife Services, and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department are assisting with the field work.

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