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Utah Prairie Dogs: Creative Strategies to De-list a Problematic Endangered Species

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ABSTRACT: The Utah prairie dog (UPD) was listed as “endangered” in 1973; it was down-listed to “threatened” in 1984. Regulatory agencies have realized that protecting and promoting UPD on federal lands alone is not efficient. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and private landowners desire a shift in the current recovery strategy in order to remove the threatened status of UPD as well as provide for management of UPD damage to private property. The time is right to begin a creative management strategy. One suggested new strategy would combine population counts of UPD living on private and public lands toward the recovery goal, as part of the new recovery plan. A survey of agricultural producers in the region with UPD revealed that 70% of the producers feared working with the USFWS on sensitive species issues, because of possible restrictions to their production. To date, the majority of producers would not be interested in creating conservation easements or safe harbors on their property. However, they are willing to work with local Extension agents and the Utah Farm Bureau to create solutions. Therefore, the first step to trying a new approach to UPD recovery will be to foster trust between local producers and regulatory agencies. New programs will focus on building trust, just compensation for losses, stewardship of the land and community, and cooperation.

KEY WORDS: conservation, cooperative, *Cynomys parvidens*, endangered species, strategy, Utah prairie dog

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BACKGROUND OF UTAH PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT

The Utah prairie dog (*Cynomys parvidens*; UPD) was listed as federally “endangered” in 1973; it was down-listed to “threatened” in 1984. The original recovery plan written to manage UPD populations has had little success in increasing their numbers on federal lands. This plan also limits the ways and the extent to which private landowners can protect their lands from UPD damage. Therefore, both regulatory agencies and private landowners desire a shift in strategy in order to remove the threatened status of UPD as well as provide for management of UPD damage to private property.

This new strategy strives to create a way that private landowners can manage UPD on their private lands to reduce damage while still protecting the species by maintaining or increasing their numbers. The suggested strategy is to combine population counts of UPD living on private and public lands toward the recovery goal, as part of the new recovery plan. This can only be achieved by utilizing existing federal and non-profit conservation agreements, safe harbors, and incentive programs to involve private landowners in the recovery process.

Today, over 70% of UPD reside on private or state land (Bonzo and Day 2002). On private land, UPD often cause damage to agricultural crops. As a result, landowners of southwestern Utah have a history of negative feelings toward UPD and their management. However, with a few years of cooperation among management agencies and landowners, we could very well remove the “threatened” status from UPD.

A NEW PLAN

When the original management recovery plan was created, private landowners had no interest in protecting what they considered “pests”. Therefore, the USFWS wrote the plan to focus only on federal and state lands. However, 30 years later, private landowners feel like their hands are tied in protecting themselves against damage. Additionally, regulatory agencies have realized that protecting and promoting UPD on federal lands alone is not efficient. The time is right to begin a creative management strategy. First, management personnel must understand public sentiments about UPD and their protected status and management.

A survey was conducted by Utah State University to determine the public’s opinion regarding UPD recovery and management (Elmore 2006). USU surveyed 600 randomly selected residents of counties where UPD occur and 600 agricultural producers in these counties (24% of the agricultural community). There was a 55% response rate to the survey. Of those agricultural producers surveyed, 62% had UPD on their land; 33% of these people stated that UPD had affected their operation. Of the agricultural producers surveyed, 70% stated that fear of restrictions under the Endangered Species Act hindered their willingness to receive aid or assistance. Additionally, 34% of the agricultural respondents admitted that they had attempted in some way to discourage UPD on their land to avoid regulatory problems. When damage was incurred, 27% of the survey participants were interested in financial or technical assistance to compensate losses caused by

Figure 1. Percentage of survey respondents from the agricultural community that would be willing to work with a selection of natural resource agencies*, Utah, 2005.

*UDWR = Utah Division of Wildlife Resources; USFWS = U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; BLM = Bureau of Land Management; USFS = U.S. Forest Service; NRCS = Natural Resource Conservation Service; Nature Cons. = The Nature Conservancy

UPD. In fact, 67% of the agricultural participants believed ranchers or farmers who allowed UPD to live on their land should be compensated. Not surprisingly, 93% of the agricultural producers felt that conservation and/or environmental organizations should provide the compensation.

Perhaps the largest obstacle toward cooperation between the public and regulatory sectors of government is that 83% of those agricultural producers surveyed would not be interested in entering into a conservation easement. This lack of desire to participate in an easement reflects the historical distrust this section of the public has of regulatory agencies (Figure 1). The survey revealed that Utah State University Extension and the Utah Farm Bureau Federation were the only two organizations that the agricultural respondents would be “very willing” to work with. However, roughly 50% of these same respondents did report that, in addition to these two agencies, they would be “somewhat willing” to work with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Wildlife Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, or the U.S. Forest Service (order of organizations not relevant). Thus, to start something new, the USFWS may be more successful if they collaborate with Extension or the Farm Bureau to ‘break the ice’ with local landowners and begin to foster a sense of trust.

Conservation Strategies

There are several strategies available to landowners seeking to manage UPD on their land— conservation easements, safe harbor agreements, and conservation banking (<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/recovery/>).

Conservation easements are agreements between a landowner and a governing agency (e.g., USFWS). The easement allows the owner to use the land but the owner must give up some of the rights associated with the land. This easement usually requires the protection for target species in perpetuity. Safe harbor agreements are voluntary arrangements between the USFWS and private landowners. The agreement calls for voluntary management for a listed species, while giving assurances to participating landowners that no additional future regulatory restrictions will be imposed. Conservation banking is a type of mitigation in which a listed species is protected on non-federal land. When someone plans a project that will impact the target species, the developer can buy credits from a conservation bank. The bank owner then uses the money to protect the resources on the bank land.

There are several visible outcomes to a new plan that utilizes any or all of these three conservation strategies. First, by combining UPD numbers on private and public lands, there is an increased possibility of achieving the recovery goal needed to remove the “threatened” status of the UPD. Second, a new strategy would provide an opportunity for landowners to avoid or minimize damage to their operations and also improve portions of their land. Additionally, it would increase the amount of control that participating landowners had in managing UPD. Finally, it would provide a template for future management plans involving problematic endangered species.

Developing these new strategies would “break the box” of the current trend in creating management plans and would facilitate creative solutions in the future. Additionally, the activities required in developing the

new plan would create and strengthen trust among management agencies and private landowners. Finally, the process of creating these new strategies would increase communication among private and public entities that have an impact on UPD recovery.

Currently, in southwest Utah, there are two safe harbor agreements in place and several more are being considered. These current safe harbors involve livestock producers as well as alfalfa producers who are collaborating with USFWS through Environmental Defense, a non-profit organization. Through these agreements, landowners get some control of UPD populations where once they had none. Further, landowners get improvements to their land, such as fencing or vegetation treatments. Additionally, conservation banks are currently being developed on state land to mitigate UPD removal in areas desired for development.

Past models using an authoritative approach to natural resource management are quickly becoming ineffective in many management situations. This requires managers to begin to consider an approach that seeks opinions from the public and actively cooperates with the section of the public that is directly impacted by conservation strategies. Programs that restore a level of control to the landowners and those that repay landowners for protecting a public resource (reducing the cost externality) appear to have the most promise of success. In the future, we expect to see these cooperative approaches gain momentum in the management arena.

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