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Involving the Public in Prairie Dog Management on the Nebraska National Forest¹

George Probasco²

Scoping is the formal name for a process designed to identify public issues and incorporate public values into the decision making process for management of public lands. Scoping ensures that a public agency, in this case the Nebraska National Forest, will identify important issues and develop alternative management strategies for projects in full public view. Scoping has specific and fairly limited objectives: (a) to identify the affected public and agency concerns; (b) to facilitate an efficient analysis of the environmental impacts; (c) to define the issues and alternatives that will be examined in detail; and (d) to make sure that the analysis and documentation adequately address the relevant issues. Scoping should lay a firm foundation for the agency decision making process. If all the necessary information for formulating policies and making rational choices has been considered then the agency will be able to make sound and prompt decisions that will usually satisfy the public.

The scoping process began on the Nebraska National Forest when the Prairie Dog Management Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) was appointed by the Forest Supervisor. The ID Team reviewed existing information obtained through previous public involvement efforts for earlier management decisions. Following this analysis the Team then put together a brochure for distribution to the public in order to gain further input about prairie dog management on the Nebraska National Forest. The brochure was titled "Issue Identification for Prairie Dog Management." It was mailed out in September 1986 and comments were due in the Supervisor's Office by December 1, 1986.

Over 200 documents containing comments about prairie dog management were received by the Forest. Comments were received from a wide variety of people with the following affiliations: academic/extension, business/industry, concerned citizen, environmentalist, government (local, State, and Federal), grazing permittee, grazing association, landowner, natural resource group, professional society, prairie dog shooter, and others.

The ID Team spent several weeks during the months of December 1986, January and February

¹Talk presented at the 8th Great Plains Damage Control Workshop. (Rapid City, SD, April 28-30, 1987).

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1987, analyzing and summarizing the public response to the brochure. The first step in the process was to go through all the response documents (response forms, letters, documented telephone calls or conversations, petitions) line by line and highlight all the opinions and values, along with the underlying reasons. Following that the ID Team went through the comments again and looked for similar themes among those comments. Comments with similar themes were then grouped into a category defined by the subject matter of the comments. The first grouping yielded 35 individual subject categories. The Team then reviewed the categories to see if some could be combined further. This second grouping yielded 24 categories. I have chosen six of the high interest categories to discuss at this workshop.

DISTRIBUTION AND MANAGEMENT OF ACTIVE PRAIRIE DOG COLONIES

One common opinion is that prairie dog colonies on public land should not be located close to private lands. Another opinion is that prairie dog colonies should be placed in areas unsuited for livestock grazing or where there will be minimum impact on livestock grazing. Other opinions dealing with the distribution of active colonies differ because some people think active colonies should be consolidated in specific areas while others think active colonies should be scattered out more. The thought was also offered that it is impossible to maintain a specified size and distribution of active colonies. Some people also think that active colonies should be treated periodically to control overcrowding; however, another opinion questions whether treating the perimeter of an active colony will decrease prairie dog dispersal or slow colony expansion. There was one suggestion for establishing a large prairie dog area between the Badlands National Park and the White River, then eliminate prairie dogs elsewhere.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT

Opinions for this subject were so numerous and varied that subcategories were created to adequately describe it.

Cost and Benefits

There was concern that the costs and benefits of managing or maintaining a prairie dog population are not being thoroughly and accurately evaluated. There was also concern that a cost-benefit analysis should be conducted for different levels of prairie dog populations.

Cost-effectiveness

There were many, varied opinions dealing with cost-effectiveness. These comments range from cost-effectiveness of the prairie dog management program to specific parts of the management program such as range management, rodenticides, and shooting.

Comments ranged from what it costs the public to retain active prairie dog colonies, to how costly it is to control prairie dog colonies through vegetation manipulation, to the cost of rodenticides, to how money could be saved by cutting out black-footed ferret surveys.

Economic Analysis

The concern here was that economic analysis be conducted by qualified economists using scientific techniques.

Benefits

The opinion was advanced that the value of prairie dog shooting to the economy, if properly managed, is equal to that of livestock grazing.

Social and Economic Impacts of Black-footed Ferret Re-introduction

Comment was made that the full social and economical impacts of black-footed ferret re-introduction need to be disclosed.

EFFECTIVENESS OF LIVESTOCK GRAZING PRACTICES IN CONTROLLING PRAIRIE DOG POPULATIONS

Opinions for this subject ranged from believing that range management practices don't help control prairie dog populations to believing that range management practices will control prairie dog populations.

PRAIRIE DOG SHOOTING

The opinions for this subject ranged from using shooting to control prairie dog populations to not using shooting since it will not control prairie dog populations. Other comments were that recreational shooting should be encouraged and prairie dog populations increased to support this use while others believe that the present prairie dog population is adequate for sport shooting.

USE OF RODENTICIDES

Opinions for this subject ranged from the need to eliminate the use of rodenticides to the need to use rodenticides since that is the only proven method of prairie dog control.

THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES CONSIDERATIONS

The opinions for this subject ranged from the need to manage for black-footed ferret habitat to the need not to worry about black-footed ferret habitat since one has not been seen for 10 to 15 years and there are none in the area.

Information gained from this public involvement effort will be used in formulating a set of alternatives to deal with prairie dog management on the Nebraska National Forest. The environmental effects of these alternatives will be estimated and the results presented to the Forest Management Team. This Team will evaluate the alternatives based on the estimated effects and select a preferred alternative. This preferred alternative will be released to the public for final review and comment. Following this final review by the public, the proposed management direction contained in the preferred alternative will be added to the Forest Plan by amending it. That management direction will be the guide for managing prairie dogs on the Nebraska National Forest for the next ten to fifteen years.