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## Politics, Prairie Dogs, and the Sportsman

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*A-1 Kennels, Boxelder, South Dakota*

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## Politics, Prairie Dogs, and the Sportsman<sup>1</sup>

Jon Sharps<sup>2</sup>

I would like to speak to you today about potential economic and biological values of prairie dogs. When I refer to prairie dogs throughout my talk, I'm referring only to the prairie dogs on the National Grasslands Systems in western South Dakota. Prairie dogs have great economic potential to sportsmen and the general public and also act as ecosystem regulators to grassland plant and animal communities, and as such, could enhance both potentials if managed differently.

According to South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, sportsmen spent about 46,000 hunter days shooting prairie dogs in western South Dakota last year; and I might add, this is a conservative estimate. Sportsmen spent an estimated average of \$70 a day for a total of about 3.2 million dollars which was returned to the general economy. In addition, prairie dogs on the biological side are extremely important because they provide habitat for a host of avian and mammalian prey and predator species.

In 1978 the Forest Service and the Department of Game, Fish and Parks embarked on a campaign to virtually eliminate the prairie dogs from the National Grasslands. The Wall Ranger District and the Fall River Ranger District bore the brunt of this campaign. This decision was political and was brought about by the complaints of livestock permittees to the Forest Supervisor, State Legislature and to the Secretary of the Department of Game, Fish and Parks. The result of that campaign is the current Prairie Dog Management Plan. In my opinion, this decision and resultant plan was and is wrong when one considers that the permittee's represent only 2% of the livestock industry in South Dakota.

When one weighs the economic and biological values of prairie dogs against livestock grazing --which, I might add, is only one aspect of the approved multiple use concept on the grasslands--one is hard put to find justification for the large-scale reduction of prairie dog towns that took place. For example, in 1978 there were approximately 43,000 acres of prairie dog towns on the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands. This is roughly equal to about 6% of those grasslands. Currently there are only about 4,200 acres of dog towns remaining, which amounts to a 90% reduction from

that 1978 level. This roughly equates to about 0.2% of prairie dog towns left on National Grasslands.

Subsequent studies have shown that assumptions made by land and wildlife managers and the political advocates of prairie dog annihilation were wrong. Those assumptions were that if you got rid of the prairie dogs you would increase forage and livestock production. Let me give you some examples. It takes around 300 prairie dogs to consume as much forage as one, 1,000-pound cow, which is somewhere around 32 pounds of forage a day. If you were to eliminate all prairie dogs from a grazing area you would only gain about 4.4% to 8% more forage for livestock, which would not be biologically or economically feasible.

In looking further into the economics of prairie dog control, it has been found that it costs approximately \$17 per acre, or around \$3 per prairie dog, to get them poisoned. These figures are from an ongoing control program on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. They are using zinc phosphide as a control agent, and the overall cost of that program is \$6.2 million and is scheduled to run five years. All things considered, I do not believe it will be economically justifiable when you consider prairie dogs repopulate at about a 30% annual rate; at least they have in the initial control area. You will have to treat the area every three years or so to maintain that kill ratio. This is with a 95% kill ratio using zinc phosphide. Studies have also shown that controlling prairie dogs did not increase forage produced whether or not cattle were allowed to graze. Results indicated that reduced livestock grazing may be required to increase forage production. It is well known and documented that prairie dogs are more abundant in areas heavily grazed by cattle than in areas where cattle are excluded. Further, plant production has increased more on areas grazed by prairie dogs only than by cattle plus prairie dogs.

All the evidence I have been able to gather suggests sportsmen and the general public have been sold a bill of goods regarding the current philosophy of prairie dog management. The cost ratio of control programs does not equate when compared to potential economic and biological benefits. This is particularly true when you consider that the primary benefactor of the current control program is the livestock permittee and the loser is the general public to whom the land belongs. The sportsman segment of the general public is the greatest loser along with the small businessman who depends on the sportsman's dollars as a part of his living. Another big loser because of the current management

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

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system is the wildlife ecosystem. Very little consideration is given to state and federally listed endangered species in my opinion. Indeed, one gets the impression they hope no endangered species will be found because it might upset the management system.

As a true part of the multiple use concept as described in the Forest Plan and by the various laws and rules authorizing that plan, I believe prairie dog towns could be increased to provide for recreation and enjoyment of the general public without harming the livestock industry. I would suggest a minimum increase of 1.8% of prairie dog towns which

could be located equally throughout the Grasslands System or where the public can have easy access to them. Biological considerations for other species should also be considered in this increase. This increased level would provide around 13,000 acres of prairie dog towns and would bring in around \$4.2 million annually to the general South Dakota economy, again assuming that \$70 per day are spent by sportsmen. I believe it is past time to recognize and manage the prairie dog for all the valuable parts it plays in the ecological scheme of things. And it is certainly past time to stop foolishly spending our tax and sportsmen's dollars on a program designed to make us all lose.