

PUBLISHED ON MAY 15, 2008:

When Animals Are Attacked

A plan to reintroduce prairie dogs into Southern Arizona has ranchers raising a ruckus

By [HANK STEPHENSON](#)

Hank Stephenson

Prairie dogs probably don't taste as good as beef, but advocates want them on ranch lands anyway.

Austin E. Moss, an 84-year rancher from Elgin, has a simple proposition for conservationists who want to reintroduce prairie dogs into Southern Arizona.

"Try to eat a prairie dog and see if you like it like a good piece of beef," Moss said at a recent meeting to discuss the Arizona Game and Fish Department's plan to release 50 to 100 black-tailed prairie dogs into man-made burrows spanning 10 acres of the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, 45 miles southeast of Tucson.

Moss is among the ranchers who are opposed to the plan.

"Prairie dogs are rodents, right?" he asked. "Why did we just go through all the trouble of getting rid of them if you people are just going to put them back?"

Ranchers say prairie dogs compete with cattle for grazing lands and can endanger cattle that step in prairie dog burrows.

"The ramifications of this happen to impact my life, our lives, every day," said Susan Krentz, whose family just celebrated their 101st year of ranching in Southern Arizona. "It's just like dominoes. Maybe the first one doesn't get to me, but the 10th one will."

The ranchers' resistance to re-establishing prairie dogs is just part of a long-held ideology of killing anything in the ecosystems of the West which is not compatible with livestock, according to Michael Robinson, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

"The heart of the issue is a dedication from the livestock industry to ensure that all of the productivity of these grasslands goes into their private business operations," Robinson said. "And then none of it is left for nature."

Black-tailed prairie dogs once inhabited as many as 1 million acres of Southern Arizona, but were completely killed off in Arizona sometime between 1920 and 1960, as federal officials poisoned them to make more room for cattle.

Robinson's book, *Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West*, describes the federal government's effort to kill off native species that compete with cattle. He says the federal government's extermination of wolves and prairie dogs were similar.

"They were (each) seen as an enemy to eradicate," he says.

Prairie dogs are known as a "keystone" species of the desert grasslands, because they provide aeration to the ground, mix soils and nutrients, graze grasses and provide food to many other grassland species, according to Jared Underwood, small mammal conservation coordinator with the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Without prairie dogs, the landscape of Southern Arizona has changed drastically.

"Mesquites would never really dominate in an area that had prairie dogs, because they wouldn't let them grow there," said Underwood. "They would actually help keep the grasslands as grasslands."

The prairie falcon, burrowing owl and golden eagle have all experienced decreases in population which are believed to be connected with the elimination of black-tailed prairie dogs. The black-footed ferret, which fed almost exclusively on black-tailed prairie dogs, is nearly extinct.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are chatty rodents, according to Con Slobodchikoff, a biology professor at Northern Arizona University who has spent more than 10 years studying prairie dogs. They have complex calls to identify at least four of their top predators: coyotes, hawks, domestic dogs and man. According to his research, prairie dogs can communicate type, size and relative speed of a predator, and they even have different warning calls for a man and a man with a gun.

The prairie dogs in Las Cienegas would be relocated from a similar re-establishment colony in southern New Mexico. The Arizona Game and Fish Department would monitor the prairie dogs for at least the next six years, checking disease, colony growth and general effects on the area.

Game and Fish officials would remove the prairie dogs from any private land where they are not wanted, says Underwood.

The Las Cienegas National Conservation Area includes 45,000 acres of grass and woodlands, with about 15,000 of these acres suitable for black-tailed prairie dogs.

The Game and Fish Department expects the original 10-acre prairie dog habitat to grow to 100 acres within the next five to 10 years. The plan is projected to cost \$276,000 over the next five years.

The black-tailed prairie dog was once listed as a candidate for the Endangered Species List, but was removed from the candidate list in 2004, partially because of to an 11-state agreement to save the prairie dog. The plan in Las Cienegas is the beginning of Arizona's part of the agreement, which calls for the prairie dog to inhabit up to 7,000 acres of state and federal lands in Arizona.

If the plan is approved, the first prairie dogs would be released into Las Cienegas sometime between July and September of this year.