

## **2023 Annual Prairie Dog Meeting Questions and Answers**

### **Co-existence**

1. Is Viability of agriculture part of the goals of your coexistence strategy? How are you assessing agricultural viability?

Answer: The Shared Learning Collaborative project on the Minnetrista II and Canino leasehold is intended to address the question of co-existence. The group is tracking time and money going into the project; field productivity for the agricultural tenant; soil health and vegetation community responses to management actions; and health condition scoring of livestock on the property. However, the Minnetrista II and Canino properties are not currently in a state where agriculture is viable, even if prairie dogs were removed. As such, the first years of the collaborative's activities are more geared to trialing various methods and livestock utilization to rehabilitate the property in the presence of prairie dogs. These trials will ultimately contribute to a better understanding of what agricultural practices and site conditions are possible or required for co-existence. If trials perform well, it may be possible in the future to define standards for viability that can be measured as part of this experiment.

2. What exactly happens to the P.Dogs when you apply your techniques on the land?

Answer: Prairie dog populations expand and contract over time based in various environmental conditions. Wet years that result in abundant vegetation growth naturally reduce prairie dog colony size on OSMP land. We are working to mimick this natural process by seeding species that rapidly grow tall and dense in the summer on irrigated fields that are occupied by prairie dogs. Colonies shrink as the abundant vegetative growth is not favorable for prairie dogs which results in colony contraction through an increase in animal density in a smaller area; dispersal, if surrounding habitat is more favorable; increased competition between family groups; and likely increased predation as visibility for spotting predators is reduced through the taller and more dense vegetation.

### **Irrigated Ag Land Removals**

3. Confirming that the 2023 evaluation of the pdog removal on irrigated ag lands applies ONLY to irrigated ag lands?

Answer: Implementation of the project and expansion system-wide as a result of the 2023 program evaluation is limited to irrigable agricultural properties.

4. It was mentioned that post 2023 evaluation, the scales of removal would be the same. Does this mean a no net gain or loss of removals will be a guiding factor in management?

Answer: The annual removal goals remain the same: 100-200 acres removed via lethal control, and up to 40 acres removed via relocation. Cumulative removal is dependent upon how much irrigable land is occupied by prairie dogs over time.

5. Why did staff want to expand the project area beyond the originally designated project area?

Answer: The two main factors were that there are higher quality irrigated land / better agricultural opportunities at some sites outside the project area. A second factor is that some small, isolated colonies outside the project area can be more cost effectively controlled before they grow and while impact to the irrigated field is limited, leading to less removal over the long-term.

6. Since lethal control will be managed in house by OSMP, when will lethal control begin on the irrigated agricultural fields?

Answer: Lethal control will not take place between March 1 and May 31 during the prairie dogs pupping and dependent young season. Control activities can happen any time outside of this date range if weather and field conditions are appropriate. It is possible that hiring and training staff in 2024 may delay lethal control activities until after June 1.

7. Doesn't it make sense to start early in June to make sure that all parcels are managed in a timely manner?

Answer: It generally does make sense to start lethal control activities as early in the year as possible. With in-house capacity for lethal control, contractor availability will no longer be a limiting factor on the timing of removal. However, other considerations also contribute to decisions around timing of removal- weather can impact the appropriate timing of lethal control, and our practice is to have barriers in place prior to lethal control activities and barrier construction takes a significant amount of time in some cases. There may also be some instances where it is more conducive for the agricultural tenant for us to wait until later in the year to implement control activities depending on how densely the agricultural field is occupied.

8. Will regeneration/restoration of those parcels begin as soon as the prairie dogs are removed?

Answer: This will vary from property to property. Infrastructure work and some rehabilitation efforts can occur prior to the removal of prairie dogs, however most of the rehabilitation work does have to wait until prairie dogs are removed. When prairie dogs are not removed until late in the fall or early winter, it is typical that rehabilitation work is delayed for between three to nine months following removal. Rehabilitation on sites where prairie dog removal occurs early in the summer and early fall will allow rehabilitation work to start immediately following removal.

9. What, if any removal action is planned for Boulder Valley Ranch? If it is lethal control, how is that management permitted in the Grassland Plan and policy on lands designated as Grassland Preserve?

Answer: Removal by lethal control is planned on approximately 74 acres of irrigated hay fields and irrigated pastures in the Boulder Valley Ranch area. This area is within the northern grassland preserve. The Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan allows for prairie dog removal from grassland preserves to maintain existing irrigation facilities and irrigated fields and when prairie dog occupation exceeds 26% and is impacting vegetation conditions. In addition, the 2020 City Council direction for prairie dog removal in irrigated agricultural fields included all irrigated agricultural fields in the Northern project area, regardless of management designation.

10. Can you please confirm that removals are only planned for lands designated irrigated, agricultural lands?

Answer: Removals are planned only for colonies on irrigated agricultural parcels, though in some cases, portions of colonies may stretch outside of the irrigated portion of a property. In these cases, whether the entire colony is removed, or only the irrigated portion will depend on the extent of occupation on and off irrigated portions of the property, and the potential for successful management of the property with portions of the colony remaining after removal.

### **Budget/Expenditures**

11. How are you tracking costs of coexistence? What costs are you including in your costs of coexistence?

Answer: See the answer to question 1. Although rehabilitation in the presence of prairie dogs is providing insight into potential co-existence strategies, at this point, this work is geared toward stabilizing and improving agricultural infrastructure, soil health, and vegetation communities until actions more directly related to prairie dogs are undertaken. As a result, these actions are embedded in a full, robust program of agricultural property management and restoration that is funded from a variety of budget areas. Budget numbers presented in annual summaries include capital and operating funds, but not staff time. Other than tracking time spent managing noxious weeds, we do not currently have a system in place to specifically track crew work time on specific project sites in relation to prairie dog co-existence.

12. What is the total annual budget for all prairie dog management activities and land restoration actions? It appears that the budget requirements for all of the management and restoration actions estimated for 2024 are close to \$1,000,000. Is that an accurate estimate?

Answer: There is a total of \$890,000 of OSMPs 2024 budget allocated to prairie dog conservation and agricultural land restoration activities. This is comprised of \$690,000 in the 2024 capital budget allocated for prairie dog conservation and management and irrigated agricultural land restoration and an additional \$200,000 in operating funding to support prairie dog working group initiatives and prairie dog conservation. These figures do not include staff time and associated personnel budgets.

### **Regulations**

13. Are there any Colorado state level laws or initiatives that are addressing this issue on a State level?

Answer: State law affects prairie dog relocations in that a permit must be issued by Colorado Parks and Wildlife to move prairie dogs from one land parcel to another. Furthermore, if prairie dogs are to be relocated to another county, the County Commissioners of the receiving county must approve the relocation. Black-tailed prairie dogs, which are the species that occurs in the Front Range, have no regulatory protection at the state level, aside from a seasonal shooting closure on public lands during

spring and early summer to protect females and pups during the breeding season. CPW does recognize that prairie dogs are an integral component of native prairie ecosystems and are crucial for black-footed ferret recovery, and CPW staff and researchers are very involved in plague and habitat management and population monitoring for prairie dogs. In addition, chemical methods of prairie dog lethal control are regulated by the State's pesticide application laws.

14. Before a lethal removal is executed by the city, do they have to state the reasons for the lethal control?

Answer: Lethal control that is done by the City of Boulder must be permitted through the Planning and Development Services Department under the regulations set forth in the City's wildlife protection ordinance. The permitting process does require that the reason for lethal control be stated. Lethal removal of prairie dogs on irrigated agricultural lands in the OSMP system was granted a Special Permit since it is considered a public improvement project that was approved by City Council.

### **Neighbors**

15. Of the 900 OSMP adjacent neighbors, how many have been helped with reducing conflict and how many remain outstanding?

Answer: We estimate that approximately 95 neighbors adjacent to OSMP have had prairie dog conflicts reduced as a result of removal projects since 2020. In addition, staff have supported dozens of additional neighbors through the past several years through one-on-one conversations discussing options available to the landowner and best ways to approach the conflict. We should note that the 900 neighbors contacted about the annual meeting were identified through a spatial search for properties within 50 feet of an OSMP property with prairie dog occupation. This approach to identify neighbors to receive prairie dog information was designed to capture all landowners that had the potential to experience prairie dog conflict related to prairie dogs on OSMP, not those landowners actually experiencing conflict, which is likely much lower than this number.

16. I am a neighbor and have never heard of the neighbor communication program. How do I find out about this?

Answer: Staff sent out information postcards to 900 neighbors in 2023 with the goal of providing neighbors who might not be aware of these programs the information necessary to understand the prairie dog management program on OSMP and how to get in touch with staff for more specific conversations about their circumstances. This information was detailed in online presentations and at the 2023 public meeting (both of which can be found on the OSMP Prairie Dog Conservation and Management page). Neighbors may contact OSMP staff and receive updates on prairie dog management through a variety of ways:

- Inquire Boulder- available on City of Boulder webpage- receives prompt response from appropriate staff
- By phone- 303-441-3440 (voicemail, will be sent to appropriate staff)

- Open comment at Board of Trustees meetings (typically second Wed of month), City Council Meetings (Thursday evenings), Information on board and city council meetings is available at [bouldercolorado.gov](http://bouldercolorado.gov)
- Attend annual community prairie dog meeting- ask questions, provide feedback
- Join prairie dog stakeholder email list- <https://bit.ly/prairie-dog-updates>

17. FYI, when I used Inquire Boulder it literally took months before someone from OSMP got back to me. The message I received from OSMP was basically we, as neighbors, are on our own. OSMP takes no responsibility for any prairie dog issues on neighboring properties. Is this still true?

Answer: The expectations of staff include prompt responses to requests that come in through Inquire Boulder (usually only a few days depending on staff availability and other work). Although we do not know what the specific circumstances of your inquiry were that led to the lengthy wait for a response, in some cases, inquiries are incorrectly assigned to the wrong department or staff member, and may take a while to make their way to the appropriate person. Based on your characterization of the response you received, it does not appear to include the level of detail or information that should be included in responses from OSMP prairie dog staff. In general, prairie dogs are native wildlife that occur naturally on the landscape. OSMP does not typically attempt to control the movement of wildlife across the landscape, including prairie dogs, except in cases where we build barriers to keep them out of removal/restoration areas as directed by City Council. We are happy to discuss options with neighbors who want to prevent prairie dogs from coming on their property or remove existing prairie dogs. We also plan to pilot a cost-sharing program in 2024 for neighbors who want to build prairie dog barriers to reduce the likelihood of prairie dogs moving into their property (see related questions below).

### **Associated Species**

18. I believe restoration of natural ecosystems balance should be a priority to the extent possible. With that in mind wouldn't coyotes be considered a natural predator to PDs? What is OSMP view of coyotes/natural predation and Is CPW receptive to repealing the open year-round season on trapping/killing coyotes to support natural predation?

Answer: Prairie dogs on the OSMP system are prey to many wildlife including coyotes, badgers, bobcats, hawks, eagles, and owls. Part of OSMPs goals in preservation of natural lands in Boulder County is supporting native species and ecosystems, including natural predator-prey dynamics. Hunting and trapping is prohibited on all City of Boulder properties. We do not have control over CPW (Colorado Parks and Wildlife) policies regarding coyotes outside of OSMP lands and elsewhere in Colorado- those policies are set by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Parks and Wildlife Commission.

19. Do burrowing owls use unoccupied or abandoned prairie dog burrows for nesting? How do burrowing owls determine prairie dog burrow occupancy?

Answer: Burrowing owls use unoccupied prairie dog burrows. They probably figure out occupancy easily if they try to enter a burrow with a busy prairie dog family, as its unlikely that prairie dogs would want to share their immediate space with burrowing owls. Burrowing owls often spend time in various parts of a colony before settling on what burrows they will use as nest burrows. This time likely gives them time to learn about prairie dog activity on the colony, and find appropriate, unoccupied burrows.

### **Barrier Cost Share Program**

20. Will the cost share program share the maintenance of the barriers?

Answer: Barrier maintenance will be the responsibility of the private land-owner since the barrier will belong to them- the cost-share program is intended to offset some of the cost to the landowner of installing their own barrier.

21. Would you please post the location/link that describes the chicken-wire standards mentioned by Tori during the discussion of the barrier-cost-share program.

Answer: These standards will be available when the program gets closer to going live.

22. Does cost of barrier in cost sharing program include the materials and labor to install the barrier or just the materials?

Answer: The barrier cost-sharing program will provide 50% of the barrier cost (up to a to-be determined maximum) based on the standard, per-foot cost to build chicken wire barrier, including materials and labor for the number of linear feet proposed by the applicant.

23. Does reimbursement cost of barrier in the proposed cost sharing program include both the materials and labor to install the barrier or just the materials?

Answer: See above.

### **Habitat Suitability Model**

24. What are the so-called “social components” incorporated into the prairie dog habitat suitability model?

Answer: We are still working on defining these, but they likely will include things like irrigated agricultural, structures, irrigation infrastructure, stock corrals, parking lots, and trails, roads, etc. We also are still working on how best to incorporate the adjacency of private neighbors as a factor.

25. We are happy to share the social factors we incorporated into our Homes on the Range modeling

Answer: Thank you! We are aware of the Homes on the Range project and have been reading the reports to see how social factors used in this model might translate to our smaller-scale modeling project.

### **Population/monitoring**

26. Can you please share the number of colonies after the 2023 monitoring occurs? I.e.: a 9.8% decrease and decrease in number of colonies was reported in 2023 for 2022; when will the 2023 numbers be complete and can you please share them with us when they are attained?

Answer: There were 111 active colonies identified during 2023 mapping which was completed during September to early October. This was a decrease from 131 colonies identified during 2022 mapping. The

9.8% decrease was for total active acres of prairie dogs, not colonies. OSMP did not perform removal or relocation on this number of colonies, so some of this reduction was due to other factors- for example, some 2022 colonies were small satellite colonies that with the robust vegetation growth in 2023 may have re-joined adjacent colonies, or two colonies grew together, forming one larger colony from two smaller ones.

27. So, after the 2023 colonies that were managed or removed are recorded, there could tentatively be less than 111 colonies (down from the 131)?

Answer: In most cases, mapping occurs after removal. In other cases, removal occurs on only a portion of a colony (where it overlaps with irrigated agriculture), so although there may be a slight reduction in the overall number of colonies after the fall mapping effort, this would be minimal.

28. What are the prairie dog occupied acres vs. desired prairie dog occupied acres (in acres and percentage occupied) on each of the three grassland preserves for 2023?

Answer:

Grassland Preserve	Total Grassland Preserve Acres	Desired Prairie Dog Occupied Acres (10-26%)	2023 Occupied Acres	% Occupied
Southern	4,127	412-1,073	428	10
Northern	3,187	318-829	2,062	65
Eastern	728	73-189	419	58

**Grassland Plan**

29. What is considered Multiple Objective Areas?

Answer: Multiple Objective Areas have preservation of prairie dogs and their associate community as one of several management goals, and prairie dogs will not conflict with other management goals, land uses, or restoration efforts, or the colony provides habitat for a sensitive associated species (e.g nesting burrowing owl) regardless of conflict. They are not used as receiving sites for relocated prairie dogs. (See Page 106 of the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan <https://bouldercolorado.gov/osmp-plans-and-reports>)

**Barriers**

30. A brand new prairie dog fence (approximately 200 meters long) was just installed in Axelson Open Space running north-south from the Axelson boundary fence near 49th street. I contacted

OSMP for information on this installation and could not find anyone who knew about it. If you all have any information on it, we would appreciate it.

Answer: Please reach out to staff through Inquire Boulder on the City of Boulder webpage or call 303-441-3440 and ask specifically for Andy Pelster, and he will get in touch with you to discuss more specifics.

### **Management Planning**

31. what criteria do you use when determining when to use lethal control vs bordering and other methods?

Answer: Lethal control is used as a removal method only on irrigated agricultural lands. We decide whether to use lethal control or relocation based on a number of factors including size of the property, ability to access and use traps without interference from other land uses, and the ability to safely use Deltadust insecticide prior to trapping (which is required by the state permit). We also factor in how we can use barriers (where and what kind of barrier materials) to prevent recolonization after prairie dog removal, if barriers might have negative impacts for other wildlife, vegetation, or weeds, and how restoration of irrigation and soil will work on the property. In most cases, removal through lethal control or relocation is accompanied by barrier installation to minimize the potential for prairie dogs to recolonize the property after removal.

### **Weed Management**

32. is curly dock on your weed control list? It is absolutely taking off across the landscape throughout city of boulder and boulder county.

Answer: Due to state and county regulations and resources, capacity available for weed management, OSMP staff focus weed management efforts primarily on State prioritized noxious weeds. As curly dock is not a state identified noxious weed, we do not directly manage the species unless it is interfering with the success of rehabilitation activities or incidentally as we are managing noxious weeds such as common teasel and Canada thistle. Rehabilitation occurring on these properties is the best method for ultimately reducing the occurrence of curly dock on OSMP properties as it thrives in denuded and compacted moist soil with minimal competition from other plant species.

33. I don't see cheat grass on your lists and the County is going to great lengths to address this weed chemically with a controversial herbicide. Do we not have cheat grass on City properties?

Answer: There is cheatgrass on OSMP, however, it is not currently a concern on the irrigated agricultural properties we are rehabilitating following the removal of prairie dogs. Ultimately, we suspect cheatgrass will not be able to compete with the diverse and robust plant community supported by irrigation water that is being re-introduced to these properties during the rehabilitation process.

### **Other topics**



34. Are these plans based on the premise of maintaining a static population number of prairie dogs within City of Boulder Open Space? If not, how might we best account for the species' exponential annual growth?

Answer: The Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (2010; see Appx D viewable at <https://bouldercolorado.gov/osmp-plans-and-reports>) describes management targets for prairie dogs. Three indicators address prairie dog occupancy on the OSMP system: Percent of prairie dog occupied acres in Grassland Preserves, Multiple Objective Areas, or Prairie Dog Conservation Areas, (with a Very Good Ranking if >85% of occupied acres occurs in these management designations, not transition or removal areas); Grassland Preserve occupancy between 10% and 26%; and total acres of active prairie dog colonies on the OSMP system (with a Good ranking for 800-3,137 acres). OSMP does not have a management goal to maintain static population numbers of prairie dogs due to the challenges presented by natural cycles beyond our control. Prairie dog populations do not increase exponentially; prairie dog reproduction is density-dependent, meaning reproduction slows down when populations are dense, and populations react to conditions including food availability, vegetation growth, harsh winter conditions, etc. In fact, occupied acres on OSMP decreased between 2022 and 2023 by 9.8% due to on-going removal efforts as well as shrinking of some colonies likely due to high vegetation growth during the wet spring and early summer.

35. How about birth control instead of lethal management?

Answer: We remain interested in birth control to manage prairie dog populations; however, the current state of the technology requires that individual prairie dogs be captured and injected with contraceptive. It would be prohibitively time consuming and expensive to trap and inject enough prairie dogs to influence population dynamics on the scale of OSMP prairie dog colonies and given the relatively short life span of prairie dogs (typically less than five years in the wild), it would have to be repeated regularly. Researchers are interested in oral contraceptives for prairie dogs, but the research and approval process is in early stages and crucial evaluations are still needed, including investigating the potential for non-target species to be exposed to and impacted by the contraceptive, creating potential ecosystem-wide issues.

36. You mentioned colonies, are their names for same, if so I live near north 47th street can you tell me their name?

Answer: We distinguish prairie dogs by unique names and identification numbers. Names often correspond to the name of the property where the colony is located. The best way to see those identifiers is by accessing the City of Boulder Open Data Portal (<https://open-data.bouldercolorado.gov/>) where we have prairie dog colony maps resulting from each year of mapping and click on a specific colony- a pop up will appear with colony information, including the name OSMP uses to identify it.

37. what is the definition of "infestation" and "infected" and how does it relate to Prairie Dog original habitat parameters? (If the area of infestation is within original prairie dog habitat how is it considered an "infestation?")

Answer: These are not terms used at OSMP to describe prairie dog populations as they are not meaningful in a biological or management way since prairie dogs are a native species. Typically, we describe properties with prairie dogs as “occupied” and we might describe a colony as densely occupied or not very densely occupied. Since prairie dogs are colonial and social, they group together on the landscape, and we don’t really see “sparsely” occupied colonies. The Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan recognizes that prairie dogs are a native grassland species and play an important role in this ecosystem. OSMP strives to protect robust prairie dog populations in native prairie areas where they can exist in mostly intact, functioning grassland ecosystems. Because OSMP owns and manages many lands historically converted to agriculture from native prairie, with ongoing human use, our charter purposes recognize the importance of conserving both native species and ecosystems as well as the agricultural heritage of the Boulder Valley. When prairie dogs occupy irrigated lands where they impact agricultural activities, we consider these prairie dogs in conflict with the desired land use, and we make decisions about how to manage them due to that conflict in the context of property specific, and system-wide management goals.