



File Code: 1950

Date: November 24, 2014

Matt Mead
Governor
State of Wyoming
State Capitol
200 W. 24th Street
Cheyenne, WY 82002

Dear Governor Mead:

I have reviewed the Revised 2001 Thunder Basin National Grassland Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) and the 2009 Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Management Strategy (2009 Strategy) in relation to the April 17, 2013 prairie dog management proposal submitted by the State of Wyoming. I believe the Forest Service can provide viable populations of black-tailed prairie dogs and associated species and minimize encroachment of prairie dogs from Federal lands onto neighboring state and private lands without a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis and a new amendment to the 2001 LRMP. We can achieve effective prairie dog management by modifying the 2009 Strategy, pursuing a land exchange with the State of Wyoming, and formulating a prairie dog collaborative working group or technical advisory committee. These activities would not require an amendment to the LRMP and associated Environmental Impact Statement. Instead, they would allow us to manage prairie dog populations and habitats on the Thunder Basin National Grassland (TBNG) in the most efficient, productive, cost-effective, and responsive manner to address the concerns of the State of Wyoming, counties, and private landowners.

Background: In response to the State of Wyoming's April 17, 2013 proposal, the Forest Service initiated public scoping on a proposed prairie dog LRMP amendment via publication of a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register in November of 2013. The scoping period ended on January 3, 2014; roughly 58,000 comment letters were received. The Interdisciplinary (ID) Team assigned to this project performed a content analysis of the comments and finalized a recommended list of scoping issues, issue statements, and indicators. The ID Team is currently preparing alternatives. In order to complete a Grassland Plan amendment, future work includes preparation and distribution of a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, a public comment period, development and distribution of a Final Environment Impact Statement, and issuance of a Record of Decision with an objection period.

Issues and concerns related to prairie dog management as identified by the State of Wyoming, the Forest Service, and the public, include:

- Decrease the potential expansion of prairie dog colonies onto adjacent private and/or State lands in Prairie Dog Management Categories 1 and 2 using boundary management;
- Ensure consistency with the current Wyoming Game and Fish Department Prairie Dog Translocation Policy;
- Ensure habitat requirements are met and necessary acreages are provided to support viable populations of prairie dogs and their associated species. This includes maintaining sufficient acres of prairie dog habitat to: a) support black footed ferret reintroduction; b) support other



dependent species; and c) maintain Region 2 sensitive species' viability, consistent with Forest Service policy and direction;

- Ensure that lands added to the National Forest System through future land exchanges and/or acquisitions would be managed to be consistent with the Prairie Dog Management Strategy;
- Correct a mapping error in the 2009 Prairie Dog Strategy under the description of Category 3 areas by combining Categories 3 and 4 into a single "Category" with corresponding management objectives. Currently, the map depicted in the Strategy and associated documents does not correspond with the written description of the location of Categories 3 and 4; and
- Eliminate the "designated control colony" category, as identified in the 2009 Prairie Dog Management Strategy, to maximize flexibility of where control efforts may occur.
- Improve communication and coordination with local constituents and communities.

Existing 2009 Strategy and Record of Decision (ROD)

The ability to respond to the above issues and concerns is already available within the existing 2009 Strategy, as the following examples illustrate:

"....provide for the conservation of black-tailed prairie dogs and their habitat, to address private landowner concerns about unwanted prairie dog encroachment onto private lands and adjacent to the TBNG boundaries." (2009 ROD, pg. 2)

"...minimize unwanted colonization onto adjoining private and state lands to address local landowner concerns..." (2009 ROD, pg. 17)

"Application of prescribed burning, prescribed grazing, and recreation shooting on interior colonies and application of prescribed grazing, recreational shooting and rodenticide use on boundary colonies will result in increased cooperation of adjacent private landowners in the management of TBNG..." "All prairie dog management tools are available... following the decision screens as described in ROD – Appendix B." (2009 ROD, pg. 20)

"Its goal (strategy) is to provide for the long term viability of this species (prairie dog) and those associated species with prairie dog colonies. It is designed to provide adequate amounts and distribution of occupied prairie dog colonies to support the reintroduction of the federally listed endangered black-footed ferret. It provides information on the use of available tools to facilitate prairie dog colony expansion into currently unoccupied habitat and to address unwanted colonization on to adjacent private lands." (2009 Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 5)

Section B in the current Prairie Dog Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 21, addresses unwanted prairie dog expansion onto state and private lands.

"Total prairie dog habitat size, however, may be adjusted in the future depending upon success of reintroduction efforts and the results of this analysis, the parameter defining a Category 1 prairie dog habitat may change." (2009 Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 44)

"Use of rodenticides on federal lands (in Category 1) may only be employed within ½ mile of the TBNG boundary..." (2009 Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 45)

"Rodenticide use may occur on Category 2..." (2009 Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 47)

“The locations and boundaries of Category 2 may change and shift...” (2009 Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 47)

“Site specific decisions on the use of the management tools will be made following the Decision Screens as found in the Appendix.” (2009 Conservation Assessment and Strategy, pg. 47)

FOREST SERVICE PROPOSAL:

Our proposal to manage for viable populations of black-tailed prairie dogs and associated species and to minimize conflicts with neighboring state and private lands without a new LRMP amendment and associated Environmental Impact Statement includes three parts: modify the 2009 Strategy; pursue a land exchange with the State of Wyoming; and formulate a working group. To achieve these objectives the Forest Service will:

Modify the 2009 Strategy:

- Modify Category 1 and 2 boundaries to better respond to private landowner concerns while providing sufficient habitat for black-tailed prairie dogs and other associated species;
- Update Decision Screens to reflect changes to the Strategy;
- Combine Categories 3 and 4 into a single category to enhance management efficiencies;
- Eliminate ‘designated’ control colonies to maximize flexibility of where control efforts may occur;
- Prohibit the use of anticoagulant rodenticides such as Rozol or Kaput within the Category 1 boundary or Management Area 3.63 – Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction Habitat. Consider conducting a future site-specific NEPA analysis for the use of other rodenticides as they become approved for Forest Service use;
- Ensure consistency with Wyoming Game and Fish Department prairie dog translocation policy; and
- Complete the modifications to the Strategy, as outlined above, by June of 2015.

Pursue a Land Exchange with the State of Wyoming

- The Forest Service is currently working with the Office of State Lands & Investments to investigate a potential land exchange including 14,000 acres of State to Federal ownership, and approximately the same number of acres from Federal to State ownership. This consolidation of ownership patterns would create large blocks of National Forest System lands, reduce the amount of intermingled state lands and shared boundaries, and minimize unwanted prairie dog colonization onto adjacent non-federal lands;
- The Forest Service submitted a formal land exchange application to the Office of State Lands & Investments on November 17, 2014. We anticipate that the proposal will be brought before the State Land Board for consideration in the winter/spring of 2015; and
- The Forest Service does not have the resources to complete both a Grassland Plan amendment and land exchange at the same time.

Formulate a Working Group/Technical Advisory Team

- Once formed, a working group/technical advisory committee would:
 - Recommend monitoring protocols, changes/updates to the Prairie Dog Management Strategy, and facilitate continued communications with affected landowners and interest groups.
 - Cooperate with state and county agencies to recommend appropriate responses to concerns of unwanted prairie dog colonization on adjoining private and State lands using a spectrum of management tools considered in a site-specific evaluation.
 - Annually recommend priority areas for federal treatment activities to control prairie dog expansion onto private/State lands.
 - Recommend a financial strategy for federal treatments and management of prairie dogs.
- A meeting was held on Friday, November 21, 2014 with the Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources to look at different collaborative options and processes. From the meeting it was determined that a Situation Assessment should be completed as the first step to ensure success and develop the path forward. The Situation Assessment will identify stakeholders, issues, and both long and short term goals. The Forest Service will partner with the Ruckelshaus Institute to conduct a Situation Assessment by January, 2015. The assessment could be completed by March 2015.

In summary, after reviewing the LRMP, 2009 Strategy and the ROD with the ID Team, I have determined that there is flexibility within these existing documents to address the concerns brought forward by the State of Wyoming, private land owners, and other interested parties without having to complete additional NEPA analysis. The 2009 Strategy allows for adaptive management and for utilizing an array of management tools, and as previously outlined, our proposal incorporates those elements in a three-pronged approach: modify the 2009 Strategy, pursue a land exchange with the State of Wyoming, and formulate a working group. This proposal is efficient, productive, cost-effective, and responsive to the concerns brought forward.

I sincerely appreciate the availability and input from your staff as we seek an improved approach to prairie dog management on the TBNG. I want to be clear that this is only a proposal for your consideration and input, as I have not stopped, altered, or postponed any work on the LRMP amendment process. I look forward to hearing back from you regarding this proposal and please do not hesitate to contact me at 307.745.2400 if you or your staff have any questions.

Sincerely,

/s/ Dennis L. Jaeger
DENNIS L. JAEGER
Forest Supervisor