

PRAIRIE DOG FEEDING PROGRAM

WHY FEED PRAIRIE DOGS?

As preservationists and conservationists, People for Native Ecosystems does not believe in artificially feeding wildlife – even urban wildlife. However, we are faced with a threatened species, namely the Gunnison's prairie dog, whose natural habitat has been unnaturally altered and knocked out of balance. Through no fault of their own, many prairie dogs are living in areas where they have nothing to eat. Rather than letting them starve, thereby allowing a keystone species to become extinct, supplemental feeding maintains the health of the prairie dog until relocation and/or land restoration efforts are completed.

- Human incursion, namely development of land in and around prairie dog colonies, has forced prairie dogs to become land-locked, cutting them off from their natural food supply, and diminishing the quantity and quality of open space where prairie dogs naturally exist.
- Because urban prairie dogs are land-locked, they are forced to graze in a contained area. This condition, coupled with the devastation of the drought, has denuded the land around prairie dogs, as the grasses do not have time to regenerate.
- In addition to the drought, the largest contributor to denuded land is improper land maintenance. The use of weed whackers and other inappropriate machinery as land management tools over the years has virtually graded the land. Therefore, native grasses cannot reseed and regenerate, and the tougher weeds and bramble (mostly inedible for prairie dogs) prevail.
- Prairie dogs are blamed for devastating the land, rather than seen as the victims they are. When given enough area and left to their own devices, prairie dogs do not denude the land around them. In many instances, other wildlife and cattle opt to graze near prairie dog towns. Due to their constant mowing, the shorter grasses around prairie dog homes are healthier and richer in nutrients.
- Also, when land-locked, prairie dogs will attempt to cross busy streets to feed. In order to contain them and prevent them from entering the streets and being hit by cars (not part of "natural selection"), prairie dogs are fed at their existing locations.

Another major reason for supplemental feeding is to serve the prairie dog relocation process. Prairie dogs lose a significant amount of weight during the stress of relocation. Prairie dogs are fed to keep them healthy, safe and ready for relocation.

In addition, supplemental feeding helps to ensure the animal's survival through hibernation. Although not all species of prairie dogs hibernate, the Gunnison's prairie dogs do stay below ground through the winter months. Without enough to eat during the active season, prairie dogs do not gain enough weight to survive their winter hibernation.

A benefit to prairie dog feeding is the overall health of the animals, which is critical for the health of the entire ecosystem. Supplemental feeding relieves – even if only briefly – the stress of starvation. The less stressed the animal, the healthier the animal, and the healthier they are the more resistant they are to plague and other diseases.

DOES FEEDING PRAIRIE DOGS INCREASE THE POPULATION?

Contrary to popular belief, prairie dogs are annual breeders. About half of the females over two years of age will give birth to 3 to 5 pups in the spring. The overwhelming majority will not live six months. When there is not enough food supply, prairie dogs will naturally not breed.

Since supplemental feeding occurs only once a week, it does not appear to interfere with their natural breeding cycle. From our observations, there is no more breeding activity in areas where supplemental feeding occurs compared to areas where they are not fed.

WHEN ARE PRAIRIE DOGS FED?

The supplemental feeding program begins at full emergence (usually around mid-March) and ends in mid-October, just prior to full hibernation.

Through the majority of the feeding season, prairie dogs are fed **ONCE A WEEK**.

However, feeding may increase to twice a week during critical periods (March – June) if enough vegetation is not available to gestating and/or lactating females and their pups.

Frequency and amount of feeding also increase in locations where prairie dogs have been slated for relocation or where a lot of rutting activity has been observed.

WHAT DO PRAIRIE DOGS EAT?

Prairie dogs are herbivores, with grasses forming the major part of their diet. They are selective about what they eat and prefer certain plants or parts of plants to others. Grasses may be consumed in whole or in selective parts, such as seed heads, young shoots and leaves. Generally, the stalks are eaten to within an inch or two above the ground.

Prairie dogs will also eat roots, seeds, fruit, buds and flowers that are encountered within their territory. They have also been observed eating insects, although not usually on a regular basis unless their regular vegetation is limited.

The food provided through the supplemental feeding program is designed, with the help of several wildlife biologists and prairie dog experts, to closely mimic the prairie dog's natural diet. They are fed fresh grasses or hay when possible, but for the sake of an easier delivery system, prairie dogs are fed the following once a week:

- A mixture of black-oiled sunflower seeds and 3-way grain (without molasses).
- Fresh produce mostly consisting of leafy greens and root vegetables, such as carrots, beets and turnips.

Prairie dogs do not drink water, gaining enough moisture through the vegetation they eat.

HOW MUCH DO PRAIRIE DOGS EAT?

Prairie dogs spend much of their active time eating. However, the amounts they consume are minimal when compared to other animals. For instance, "in one year, one cow eats the equivalent of what 256 adult prairie dogs consume." (Long, Kim. *Prairie Dogs: A Wildlife Handbook*, 2002, Johnson Books, p.83)