

The Ouray County Commissioners are considering a plan to control the prairie dog population at Top of the Pines (TOP) that will promote the continuation of a healthy prairie dog population while protecting TOP users from potential harm. The plan, developed by local wildlife biologist Steve Boyle, was accepted by the Top of the Pines Board of Directors which manages the area under an agreement with the BOCC. The TOP board is recommending the use of CO2 cartridges. The BOCC will make their final decision at a future BOCC meeting.

The plan identifies an area where the prairie dogs can thrive and potentially grow while restricting the population from expanding into places used by the public. It became necessary after the prairie dog colony, first noticed in 2020 in the 30-acre meadow, began to encroach into the meadow area commonly used for hiking, camping, dog exercising, and weddings.

The concerns include the possibility of injury to recreationists if accidentally stepping into a prairie dog burrow and the accidental transmission of diseases, primarily the plague which is transmitted by fleas. While the plague has not been identified specifically at TOP, there is always that possibility. Plague has recently been found in Montrose and San Miguel counties. A woman died of the plague in Durango in 2021. When a prairie dog colony gets infected by the plague it can result in up to one hundred percent mortality of the colony.

The TOP prairie dog colony currently occupies about 20 acres of the meadow which still has five to eight acres of suitable habitat into which it could expand. The plan identifies about four acres that are commonly used by the public where prairie dogs will be removed. The area will be monitored to remove any prairie dogs should they move back into it. Boyle's study concluded that the population could continue to thrive in the meadow and would not be detrimentally affected by restricting it from the area most commonly used.

Mr. Boyle evaluated several ways to control the population by both lethal and non-lethal methods. Non-lethal methods, such as live trapping, can be very costly and time consuming. While there are several lethal methods, the safest to both humans and other wildlife species in the area is the use of CO2 cartridges. After extensive consideration, this is the method recommended by the TOP Board.

The gas cartridges release carbon monoxide into the burrows. Carbon monoxide is recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association as a humane way to control prairie dog populations, with no risk of secondary contamination to scavengers.