## 2007 PRAIRIE DOG MONITORING IN THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT,

# FARMINGTON RESOURCE AREA



Submitted To:

## **Bureau of Land Management**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From 2003-2006, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) located and monitored Gunnison's prairie dog (Cynomys gunnisoni) colonies in the Farmington Resource Area of northwestern New Mexico. In 2007, we revisited 54 of the 131 prairie dog colonies located in previous years to determine current status for each, identify changes in spatial coverage, and document Burrowing Owls (Athene cunicularia). We determined that 41 of the 54 colonies (76%) were either active or probably active in 2007. Most of the 13 inactive colonies were originally visited in 2003 and 2004. Based on the area within the perimeter of colonies, we estimated that active or probably active colonies covered a total of 1,830 acres in 2007, with an average of 44.6 acres per colony. Our average was considerably smaller than the average for these colonies when previously monitored (175.8 acres). Although area estimation is highly influenced by sampling variation, we suggest that the magnitude of apparent declines in colony sizes, and the inactivity of many older colonies, might reflect an actual decline in prairie dog populations in this region. We observed six Burrowing Owls while monitoring prairie dogs in 2007, but we lack information on local trends or reproductive success. Considering the vast resources required to estimate area at prairie dog colonies, and the need for additional information on Burrowing Owl trends and reproductive success, we recommend shifting resources for future monitoring studies from prairie dogs to Burrowing Owls.

#### INTRODUCTION

Prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.) are colonial ground-dwelling herbivores that are considered keystone species throughout shrub-steppe and grassland habitats (Kotliar et al. 1999, Bangert and Slobodchikoff 2000, Hoogland 2001). Prairie dogs are considered keystone species because they create habitat (e.g., burrows and low vegetation structure) or provide a food source for a variety of taxa, including birds. Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*), and Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*) are examples of species that might be negatively affected by the loss of prairie dog colonies (Cully 1991, Dinsmore et al. 2003).

Although prairie dogs are key components of a healthy shrub-steppe or grassland ecosystem, research indicates that they have declined greatly since the late 1800s and early 1900s (Marsh 1984, Miller and Cully 2001). Declines have been attributed to poisoning, shooting, development, alteration of grazing regimes, and sylvatic plague (*Yersinia pestis*) (Cully and Williams 2001, Miller and Cully 2001). Some species (Utah and Mexican prairie dogs, *C. parvidens* and *mexicanus*) have been listed as threatened or endangered (U.S. Department of Interior 2000, Scott-Morales et al. 2004). Others might be candidates for listing in the future. Black-tailed prairie dog (*C. ludovicianus*) was once widespread and numerous, but only a small portion of historic range is currently occupied (Sidle et al. 2001, Vermeire et al. 2004); this portion is less than 1% by some estimates (Miller and Cully 2001). Gunnison's prairie dog (*C. gunnisoni*) has a more limited range (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona), and has experienced local declines in the past (e.g., Cully 1991, Cully et al. 1997). A recent petition to list Gunnison's prairie dog as endangered was denied by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In northwestern New Mexico, Gunnison's prairie dogs reside on widespread short-grass plains managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), particularly in San Juan and Rio Arriba Counties. From 2003-2006, BLM located and estimated the spatial coverage of more than 100 prairie dog colonies. In 2007, BLM contracted Hawks Aloft to monitor prairie dog colonies in the Farmington Resource Area. We revisited as many of the previously documented colonies as possible to determine active or inactive status and estimate current area. Our objectives were to 1) determine the percentage of active colonies, and if that percentage depended on the year they were found, 2) identify any obvious changes in spatial coverage of colonies, and 3) document Burrowing Owls, an associated species for which limited information exists in the region. Current information on prairie dog and Burrowing Owl distribution on the North Unit can help BLM evaluate the health of these populations, and the ecosystem they inhabit.

#### STUDY AREA

Prairie dog colonies found from 2003-2006 were widespread throughout eastern San Juan and western Rio Arriba Counties (Fig. 1). Colonies were grouped in several regions, including the Bloomfield area, along Highway 550 south of Angel Peak, near Navajo Reservoir, and along Blanco and Largo Canyons. Colonies occurred on shortgrass mesas and valleys, but also were found in areas with substantial sagebrush. Some sagebrush habitat, particularly at Ensenada Mesa, was treated recently with herbicide for increased grass and forb livestock forage, and perceived benefits to wildlife. BLM, working jointly with New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, released pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) in this area approximately 15 years ago.



Some prairie dog colonies were in sage recently treated with herbicide.

### METHODS

We based our initial knowledge of prairie dog distribution in the Farmington Resource Area on shapefiles provided by BLM in the spring of 2007. These shapefiles included 131 apparent prairie dog colonies (21 found in 2003, 15 in 2004, 27 in 2005, and 68 in 2006). We used ArcGis to determine the center of each colony and Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) coordinates (North American Datum 1983) for that center point. We kept the same colony names assigned by BLM, although we merged several adjoining colonies. Several other colonies, though disjunct, had the same name; we treat them as separate colonies but did not rename them. Area coverage, in acres, was provided for each colony, but aside from 2004, we have no information on the status of colonies when they were found and/or last monitored. All colony visits and area searches were conducted from mid-April through July. We made an effort to visit colonies during the morning or late afternoon, considering that prairie dog activity might be greater during those periods. We determined the current status of each colony as active, probable, or inactive. Colonies were considered active if prairie dogs were detected by sight or sound, and probable if prairie dogs were not detected but evidence of recent activity (e.g., fresh digging or scat) was apparent. If we observed no prairie dogs or indication of recent activity, we considered the colony to be inactive. We watched the colony for at least 15 minutes, from our vehicle if possible, to determine status, count the number of prairie dogs visible, and document Burrowing Owls. We later examined many of the burrows in the colonies for additional evidence of occupancy by prairie dogs or owls. In addition to visual observations of owls, we report any discovery of owl pellets, prey remains, or feces associated with burrows.

To estimate the area covered by active colonies, we collected UTM coordinates around the perceived colony perimeter (i.e., the outermost burrows). If a portion of the outermost burrows appeared inactive, we did not include those locations. We plotted the coordinates on ArcGIS and calculated the number of acres within each colony's polygon of points. We made an effort to collect as many coordinates as possible along the perimeter, but the number of coordinates depended on the number of burrows present. For example, we collected more than 100 perimeter points at a few large colonies, and less than 10 at a few small colonies. We present a cumulative area for colonies monitored in 2007 by adding the areas for each individual active colony. We present an average area for active colonies, and we use 95% confidence intervals to compare the current area with the average area for when the same colonies were last monitored.

#### RESULTS

We monitored 54 of the 131 prairie dog colonies (41%) in 2007 (Fig. 2, Appendix 1). Of these colonies, we determined that 13 were inactive (24%), 32 were active, and 9 were probably active (i.e., 76% either active or probably active). Colonies that were found most recently were more likely to be active in 2007. Of the 11 older colonies (from 2003 and 2004) we revisited, all were inactive, except for one colony we considered probable. We located burrows for these inactive colonies, but they were either collapsed, obstructed by debris, or otherwise appeared unused. Of the 43 more recent colonies (from 2005 and 2006) we revisited, most were either active (32, 74%) or probable (8, 19%).

Based on the area within the perceived perimeter of prairie dog colonies, we estimated that the 41 active or probable colonies in 2007 covered 1,830 acres, with an average of 44.6 acres ( $\pm$  22.8 acres) per colony (range <1 to 353.1 acres). Our estimate is smaller than the total acreage provided by BLM for these same colonies when previously monitored. The previous area for these colonies totaled 7,209 acres, with an average of 175.8 acres ( $\pm$  104.4 acres). We found that the area for 31 colonies was smaller than previous estimates, and the area for 10 colonies was larger than previous estimates. We counted a total of 903 prairie dogs in 2007, with an average of 22  $\pm$  17 per colony.

We observed six Burrowing Owls in 2007 (Table 1, next page). A pair of owls was observed at one colony and single owls were observed at three others. One owl was observed incidentally along Highway 550 and might also have been associated with a prairie dog colony. In addition to the six Burrowing Owls we observed, we encountered evidence of current occupancy (prey bones and fresh pellets) at one colony and evidence of probable past occupancy (dried prey bones and pellets) at two other colonies.

Table 1. Summary of 2007 Burrowing Owl observations	or	evide	ence of	susp	ected
previous occupancy at prairie dog colonies monitored	in	the	Bureau	of	Land
Management, Farmington Resource Area. We provide Univ	vers	al Tra	ansverse	Mei	cator
(UTM) coordinates in North American Datum 1983.					

			Owls	Burrow	
Date	Colony	Evidence	Observed	Found?	Burrow UTM
4/17/07	bac1	Old Signs	0	Inactive	233830-4063630
6/05/07	-	Visual	1	No	NA*
6/05/07	htac2	Visual	2	Active	249918-4035944
6/05/07	htac16	Old Signs	0	Inactive	Not Collected
6/05/07	htac17	Fresh Signs	0	Active	249991-4033793
7/20/07	htnwac7	Visual	1	Active	240664-4036745
7/25/07	vcac1	Visual	1	No	NA
7/26/07	spac1	Visual	1	Active	281236-4045628

\*Incidental observation along Highway 550 at 237707-4042675

### DISCUSSION

Prairie dog colony sizes varied greatly in the Farmington Resource Area in 2007, and an evaluation of Gunnison's prairie dog status in the region is complicated by the multiple perspectives that are available. We monitored a similar number of prairie dog colonies in the BLM Taos Resource Area from 2004-2006; we found an average colony size of 27.5 acres ( $\pm$  9.3) there in 2006, and an increasing trend during the study (Hawks Aloft 2006). If we use our Taos observations as a basis for evaluation, we might conclude that prairie dog colony sizes in the Farmington region (average 44.6 acres) are relatively large. However, when compared to previous monitoring results provided by BLM for the Farmington region, we found that colony sizes apparently decreased in the last few years, and some colonies apparently became inactive.

Prairie dog monitoring is subject to substantial sampling variation. Estimation of area, in particular, is complicated by variable perceptions among observers of colony perimeters. Gunnison's prairie dog colonies often contain widely spaced burrows, and they are not always easily seen from a distance. Many of the colonies in the Farmington region extended into sagebrush habitat, further limiting detectability. Two equally skilled observers could visit the same colony on the same day and map the colony perimeters differently, thereby influencing area estimations. Observers could also have different perceptions of active and inactive burrows. If observers in one year are more likely than observers in another year to include inactive burrows in their estimation of the perimeter, temporal trends could be reported when no actual changes have occurred. Although we recognize the subjective nature of area estimations, we suggest that the magnitude of apparent declines in colony sizes, and the inactivity of many older colonies, might reflect an actual decline in prairie dog populations in this region.

A variety of factors could affect the size of prairie dog colonies, including disease outbreaks, human-caused disturbance (e.g., persecution), habitat changes, and weather patterns. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, sylvatic plague has affected prairie dog numbers in some years, including Gunnison's prairie dog. Cully and Williams (2001) described the consequences of plague, including "local extirpation of colonies, reduced colony size, increased variance in local population sizes, and increased distances between colonies." We are generally unaware of the history of plague and its effects on prairie dogs in the Farmington region, but we spoke with one landowner who maintained that some local colonies were eliminated due to plague in recent years. Persecution, including poisoning and shooting, is widespread, and the effects on colonies can appear similar to plague. We observed several prairie dog bone remains and numerous collapsed burrows, perhaps indicating that human-caused disturbance occurs in this region. Habitat changes (e.g., sage treatments) and weather patterns could also affect prairie dogs in this region.

We observed Burrowing Owls at approximately 10% of the active (or probable) prairie dog colonies. Burrowing Owls are irregularly distributed. Therefore, combining owl surveys with prairie dog studies is probably more efficient than traditional transect or point count surveys. However, prairie dog monitoring is expensive, and we found that the bulk of our resources went to estimating colony size. Considering the resources required to estimate prairie dog colony sizes and the inherent sampling variation, we recommend that future resources (if available) shift from prairie dog monitoring to Burrowing Owl monitoring. We recommend annual visits to a consistent number of prairie dog colonies to determine active or inactive status, and to conduct a minimum count of prairie dogs and Burrowing Owls. Additional visits to monitor Burrowing Owl reproductive success can be allocated in place of more time-consuming perimeter mapping. Annual Burrowing Owl numbers over a consistent search area, and information on reproductive success, would allow a better evaluation of regional status for this U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2002) species of conservation concern. Prairie dog area estimation and additional aerial or ground searches, if desired, could be conducted at greater intervals.

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Figure 1. Location of prairie dog colonies found from 2003-2006 in the Bureau of Land Management, Farmington Resource Area.

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Figure 2. Location of prairie dog colonies monitored by Hawks Aloft in 2007 in the Bureau of Land Management, Farmington Resource Area. We indicate active colonies in red and inactive colonies in black. Colonies that we considered probably active are shown in orange.

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Appendix 1. Characteristics of prairie dog colonies in the Bureau of Land Management, Farmington Resource Area. We indicate Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates in North American Datum 1983. We indicate current status as Active (A), Probable (P), Inactive (I), or Merged (M). Colonies with no status indicated were not visited in 2007. We indicate spatial coverage of monitored colonies in acres and provide the number of prairie dogs counted in 2007.

	Year			2007	Original	2007	2007
Colony	Found	Easting	Northing	Status	Acres	Acres	Count
aric1	2003	255145	4082634	-	8.0	-	-
arph2	2003	257685	4079725	Ι	2.5	NA	0
icaz1	2003	241706	4084747	-	7.4	-	-
phaz5	2003	239318	4073046	-	2.2	-	-
phaz3	2003	242172	4073071	Ι	10.2	NA	0
goac1	2003	280075	4031060	-	191.1	-	-
icfl1	2003	225452	4071969	-	16.5	-	-
gmac3	2003	282418	4041917	-	14.6	-	-
phaz4	2003	239547	4071804	-	11.9	-	-
phaz1	2003	235073	4071238	Ι	10.5	NA	0
acaz1	2003	235788	4072213	Р	9.1	8.2	0
phaz2	2003	240496	4076100	Ι	8.5	NA	0
acch1	2003	238320	4096978	-	8.1	-	-
arph1	2003	255581	4078574	Ι	7.9	NA	0
phaz6	2003	232407	4072164	Ι	7.5	NA	0
phfl1	2003	230127	4072834	-	7.2	-	-
gmac2	2003	282884	4041726	-	5.3	-	-
ictu1	2003	252463	4080572	-	3.2	-	-
asph1	2003	265149	4086367	-	3.1	-	-
phch1	2003	233052	4085524	-	2.3	-	-
arac1	2003	254844	4073182	-	1.8	-	-
bic4	2004	241377	4067799	Ι	13.4	NA	0
bic3	2004	235359	4070510	-	11.3	-	-
bac4	2004	235734	4061557	-	78.6	-	-
bac5	2004	234974	4059720	-	24.0	-	-
bac6	2004	235221	4059163	-	18.4	-	-
bic2	2004	237256	4058188	-	4.3	-	-
bic1	2004	234846	4062778	-	2.9	-	-
bac2	2004	235137	4063253	Ι	37.9	NA	0
bac3	2004	235473	4062772	Ι	88.7	NA	0
hcic1	2004	228596	4067883	-	59.5	-	-
bac1	2004	233614	4063654	Ι	31.1	NA	0
hcac1	2004	227390	4058582	-	2.8	-	-
smac1	2004	273644	4030834	-	607.4	-	-
hcac1	2004	230746	4068097	-	17.9	-	-
hcac2	2004	226077	4067228	-	0.0	-	-
gpac1b	2005	271005	4045524	Ι	239.9	NA	0

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	Year			2007	Original	2007	2007
Colony	Found	Easting	Northing	Status	Acres	Acres	Count
gpac1c	2005	272402	4045937	А	138.5	41.2	28
gpac1d	2005	272352	4047331	А	292.0	113.5	31
gpac1a	2005	275350	4046005	Р	246.9	4.4	0
gpac1b	2005	275809	4046753	А	391.0	81.2	320
spac1	2005	277838	4046727	Р	43.5	9.4	0
spac2	2005	282152	4047866	А	556.4	353.1	125
spac1	2005	281742	4045625	А	300.7	319.1	107
spac3	2005	277734	4043467	А	15.9	2.1	2
spac1	2005	279179	4044551	А	93.5	22.8	15
spac2	2005	278230	4043709	Р	17.6	1.7	0
spac3	2005	284307	4053920	-	0.4	-	-
spac2	2005	279328	4055865	-	8.7	-	-
vcac1	2005	288919	4046749	А	42.0	72.2	92
hpac1	2005	245890	4049165	-	0.1	-	-
kcac1	2005	234372	4044600	-	5.4	-	-
kcac2	2005	234054	4044439	-	2.0	-	-
htnw1	2005	234451	4043154	А	131.7	38.0	2
kcac2	2005	235216	4045316	А	525.7	61.2	3
kcac1	2005	241531	4044754	-	1.2	-	-
kcac2	2005	236396	4043254	M*	263.0	M*	M*
hpac1	2005	247688	4043606	-	6.2	-	-
fcac1	2005	256332	4043439	-	8.9	-	-
gpac1	2005	266543	4050007	-	10.4	-	-
gpac2gp	2005	271584	4048237	А	52.8	21.1	1
gpac1	2005	271798	4049086	Р	195.2	0.0	0
qpac1a	2005	272129	4045251	-	190.6	-	-
pdc20060705-01	2006	276740	4087656	-	1.6	-	-
pdc20060705-02	2006	276017	4087618	-	2.4	-	-
pdc20060707-01	2006	274739	4096324	-	1.8	-	-
pdc20060707-02	2006	276631	4086109	-	1.4	-	-
pdc20060707-03	2006	275901	4085806	-	57.0	-	-
pdc20060711-01	2006	272000	4092052	-	1.8	-	-
pdc20060713-01	2006	280074	4091093	-	0.4	-	-
pdc20060731-03	2006	284323	4079723	Р	0.6	2.4	0
pdc20060731-02	2006	284414	4080038	M^	1.0	M^	M^
pdc20060731-01	2006	284091	4080382	А	6.9	6.7	1
pdc20060726-02	2006	284864	4083540	А	4.3	1.6	1
pdc20060726-01	2006	285134	4079982	А	29.4	18.7	6
pdc20060724-01	2006	273520	4077822	Ι	0.3	NA	0
pdc20060802-05	2006	278010	4074482	А	9.3	14.2	22
pdc20060802-01	2006	279536	4074509	-	3.9	-	-
pdc20060802-02	2006	280049	4074537	-	0.6	-	-
pdc20060802-03	2006	281174	4074469	-	32.0	-	-
pdc20060802-04	2006	278766	4074086	А	1.0	1.3	3

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	Year			2007	Original	2007	2007
Colony	Found	Easting	Northing	Status	Acres	Acres	Count
gmac7	2006	280516	4033284	-	0.1	-	-
gmac8	2006	280676	4033369	-	1.6	-	-
smac1	2006	266667	4035511	-	7.6	-	-
ctic1	2006	221781	4030891	-	4.5	-	-
ctac1	2006	230547	4037773	-	9.2	-	-
htnwac1	2006	233416	4036343	-	25.4	-	-
htnwac3	2006	233155	4035685	-	92.7	-	-
htnwac4	2006	238913	4035274	А	256.2	76.0	11
htnwac5	2006	237812	4036110	-	72.3	-	-
htnwac6	2006	237718	4035374	Р	30.4	35.7	0
htnwac9	2006	235975	4038450	-	1.7	-	-
htnwac10	2006	237205	4042491	-	132.3	-	-
htnwac11	2006	236363	4042774	А	9.3	9.5	1
htnwac12	2006	238293	4040595	-	89.7	-	-
htnwac13	2006	239251	4040185	Ι	0.1	NA	0
htnwac14	2006	238539	4041881	Ā	98.6	28.3	7
htnwac15	2006	241569	4036772	-	18.5	-	-
htac3	2006	243909	4039681	_	7.4	-	_
htac4	2006	243142	4040107	А	34.5	58.9	14
htac16	2006	250279	4032048	A	17.2	18.7	5
htac17	2006	249967	4033748	P	7.6	5.0	0
htac2	2006	250161	4035931	Ă	68.6	53.9	16
htac19	2006	251286	4037490	-	17.1	-	-
htac20	2006	249220	4040036	_	123.5	_	_
htac23	2006	252846	4039985	А	6.5	0.2	2
htac24	2006	252471	4038986	P	22.7	6.6	0
tmhac1	2006	255022	4029456	-	61.1	-	-
tm2	2006	257705	4031868	_	65.6	_	_
tmac3	2006	258434	4036895	_	60.5	-	_
tmac4	2006	262082	4036224	_	128.3	_	_
tmac6	2006	257208	4040165	_	0.4	_	_
tmac8	2000	256711	4042974	_	83.6	_	_
omac1	2006	278227	4039314	А	21.4	163	22
gmac?	2000	279738	4038585	Δ	65.8	34.2	$\frac{22}{20}$
gmac3	2000	280502	4038809	Δ	1 1	33	20 7
gmac5	2000	280302	4037045	-	12.2	-	,
gmac6	2000	282744	4037922	_	2.6	_	_
htnw-htac5	2000	203007	4037922	Δ	2.0 867 1	101.3	12
http://www.inac.j	2000	242238	4041947	л М <sup>#</sup>	36	101.5 М <sup>#</sup>	$M^{\#}$
htnwac7	2000	249700	4035779	Λ	5.0 1017 5	1167	0
http://	2000 2006	241044	4030400	A	1717.J 165	110.7	フ
htach	2000 2006	244130	4037272 1038700	- ^	10.3 07 7	-	- 1
tmac5	2000 2004	252442 258605	4030709	A	71.1 61 1	14.3	4
htac21	2000	250005	4030/22	-	01.4 28.2	-	-
mac 21	∠000	2019/0	4041493	-	20.3	-	-

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	Year			2007	Original	2007	2007
Colony	Found	Easting	Northing	Status	Acres	Acres	Count
htnwac8	2006	236798	4040323	-	3.1	-	-
gmac4	2006	282557	4041233	А	572.6	55.5	12
htac25	2006	244863	4041641	-	273.8	-	-
htac26	2006	253132	4040473	А	7.3	0.9	1
htac22	2006	253146	4040738	А	2.6	0.8	1
tmac7	2006	256212	4041315	-	3.2	-	-

\* Merged htnwac11 and kcac2 ^ Merged pdc20060731-02 and pdc20060731-03

# Merged htac17 and htac18