



The new Worst Hard Times



for Black-footed Ferrets in Kansas

Although spared towering dust storms, western Kansas and adjoining areas have suffered a devastating drought during the past several years. The human toll was not as severe as the 1930s-epic drought described in Timothy Egan's book *The Worst Hard Time*. But it has been rough on native ranges, and agriculture in general, and it has had an untold adverse impact on wildlife.

The dust storms of the 1930s resulted from an accumulation of flawed governmental policies – incentives to plow native grasslands. Many other government programs (including various Farm Bill subsidies and Ethanol mandates) have continued to fuel the destruction of additional tens of millions of acres of grasslands by bringing them into cultivation in recent decades.

By the same token, a variety of flawed policies at the federal, state and county levels have resulted in destruction of Black-footed Ferret (BFF) habitat through extensive poisoning of Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies on both public and private land, even though their numbers have already diminished by at least 98 percent from historic records. Adding insult to injury, they have gone further to cripple or destroy many of the opportunities to reintroduce Black-footed Ferrets in the wild by erecting statutory roadblocks and litigation campaigns against landowners who have allowed prairie dogs and associated wildlife to live on their land.

In Kansas, obstacles to recovery of even a relatively small reintroduced population

have been under constant legal attack by the Logan County Commission. Their political attack has employed the Kansas Farm Bureau and politicians at the state level who have tried to further undermine the recovery effort of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS or Service) and cooperating landowners. With the sponsorship of two western Kansas state senators – Senator Larry Powell and Senator Ralph Ostmeyer – Senate Resolution 1711 was pushed through one chamber during the 2013 legislative session. The resolution opposed the Service's establishment of a national Black-footed Ferret Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement designed to make it easier for the Service and landowners with potential habitat, and their neighbors, to work together to implement recovery programs. KDWPT officials did not file a position on the resolution, but Senator Ostmeyer said he gave the KDWPT secretary a road tour of the area to express concerns with the reintroduction project.

It would be fair to ask, "What solutions have opponents offered for conservation of threatened or endangered species?" It seems at times that they are more interested in eradication than conservation. A news article in the Colby Free Press on May 6, 2013 quoted a County Commissioner as saying in a meeting that the action he wanted to take was, "To get rid of the prairie dogs and the ferrets and the prairie chickens."

That mindset separates conservationists from extinctionists. To financially exploit and promote the extinctionist perspective, opponents brought in Fred Kelly Grant from Idaho. He rides a circuit creating distrust of the US Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies, and specifically in Kansas the work of the Service to conserve threatened and endangered species. His first target several years ago was the BFF reintroduction project, but more recently he has added potential listing of Lesser Prairie-chickens as a more widespread cause in Kansas. A "consulting firm" was established for this purpose with James Carlson of Garden City and Shelia Ellis from Scott County to visit all county commissions in the region to declare that THE SKY WILL FALL if the Lesser Prairie-chicken is listed, and request that all counties provide funding to fight the USFWS. Spokesperson Shelia Ellis reportedly told the Thomas County Commission that, "We've put a big hurt on them" with opposition to the BFF reintroduction project. The news article indicated that the firm would "bill all counties \$785 a month..." if they would join the LEPC campaign.

The most vehement opposition to the BFF project from the Logan County Commission and the Kansas Farm Bureau has been directed to Larry Haverfield, Gordon Barnhardt and Maxine Blank for their devotion to

"To get rid of the prairie dogs and the ferrets and the prairie chickens."

maintaining prairie dogs and associated wildlife on their land without allowing extensive poisoning. Nevertheless, the density of the prairie dog population has dropped to about a half of what it was prior to the drought. In addition to the direct impact of the severe drought on reproductive success and survival of prairie dogs, it has also contributed to a decline in the dependent ferret population. In the absence of poisoning with Rozol on the property, their land has a relatively abundant diversity of predators including Swift Foxes, Badgers, Coyotes, Bobcats, Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles. Thus, this combination of predators provides an element of natural prairie dog control – without eradication.

Prairie dog complexes are a magnet for other wildlife. As former AOK employee Mike Hudson said a few years ago while working and camping on the ranch, “It is like being in a national wildlife refuge.” Conversely, a landscape without wildlife is an ecological wasteland.

Because of the disproportional opposition, including the political influence of State Senator Ralph Ostmeyer, KDWPT Secretary Robin Jennison has pulled the agency’s already limited and nervous support. Early last year he proposed to the US Fish and Wildlife Service that they should remove the Black-footed Ferrets from the Haverfield/Barnhardt/Blank complex (Haverfield Ranch Complex) and move them to The Nature Conservancy’s 16,800-acre Smoky Valley Ranch. However, essentially all of the stakeholders involved in the BFF recovery effort dismiss the bizarre idea of relocating them for political purposes. Such a move would simply jeopardize the survival of any ferrets transferred.

Most of the property is devoted to other management priorities established as part of the preserve plan before ferret reintroduction became a possibility. The Conservancy has also had an aggressive prairie dog control program within and surrounding the preserve for several years, in part to win added acceptance with the Logan County Commissioners and nearby landowners.

Following a prairie dog density study during the summer of 2013 it became obvious that the population on the Smoky Valley Ranch had dropped from an

occupied area of 2,754 acres with a density of 4.5 prairie dogs per acre in 2009 to an occupied area of 1,639 acres with a density of 1.2 prairie dogs in 2013. This prairie dog population is not sufficient to sustain a population of reintroduced Black-footed Ferrets from earlier releases of captive-raised BFFs – and it could not support additional ferrets if they were transferred from the Haverfield Ranch recovery site.

The population of prairie dogs on the Haverfield Ranch in 2009 was estimated to occupy an area of 7,669 acres with a density of 4.5 prairie dogs per acre. The population density had declined to 2.2 prairie dogs per acre in 2013 due to natural causes, but scattered colonies still occupied 7,801 acres within the 10,000-acre ranch complex. From the beginning it has been, and continues to be, the best hope for reestablishment of a wild BFF population in Kansas.

It doesn’t seem biologically logical to take most of the surviving ferrets in western Kansas and transfer them to a site with only 10 percent of the total prairie dog population within the two sites. In light of the situation on the ground, that request was fortunately dropped. In recent weeks a new proposal has been described as a necessary condition to obtain KDWPT cooperation with the BFF recovery program. The proposal to the Service and the landowners is for the landowners to

allow the reduction of the acreage of occupied prairie dog colonies from 7,801 to 5,700 acres of occupied area, and for additional “target reductions” with lethal control, trapping and relocation. It states further that, “Prairie dogs from areas on the [Haverfield Ranch] targeted for control could be trapped and relocated to areas on the TNC Smoky Valley Ranch.” According to the memorandum, “This action would serve a dual purpose of achieving reductions in prairie dog numbers on the [Haverfield Ranch] complex while encouraging more rapid growth of depleted prairie dog populations at [the TNC Smoky Valley Ranch].”

Although the Logan County Commissioners and allied politicians have railed that prairie dogs are emigrating from the properties and boundary controls have not been successful, the data maintained by the field staff of USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service’s Wildlife Services division (APHIS-WS) demonstrate the opposite. As an illustration of this fact, 105,740 prairie dog burrows were treated with toxicants on neighboring properties in the 2009-2010 season. The number of active burrows dramatically declined each year and by 2012-2013 the reduced number treated totaled 40,211. Likewise, the number of prairie dogs killed with firearms dropped from 8033 in 2011 to 5073 in 2013. Following an Audubon of



Following release, a captive-raised Black-footed Ferret surveys its new home from atop a prairie dog mound on property owned by Maxine Blank..

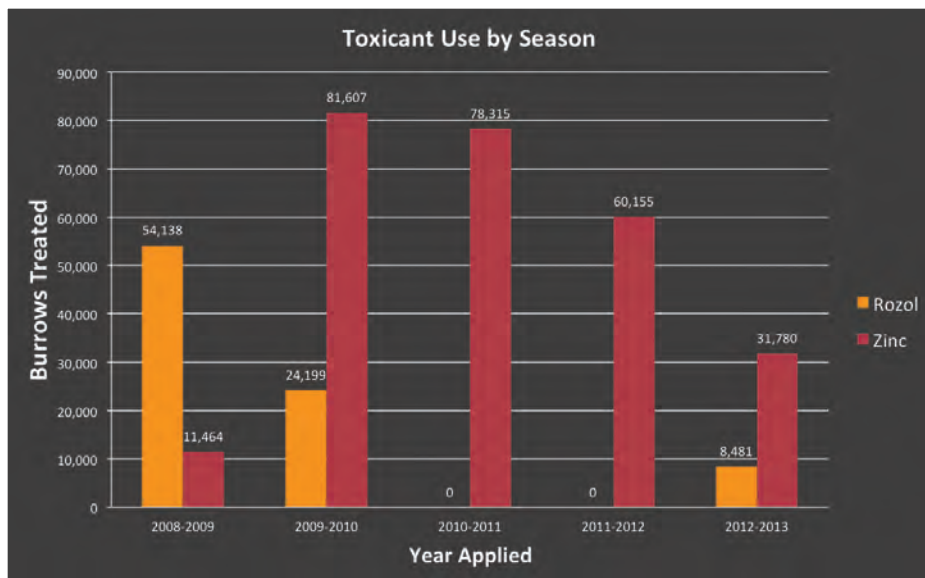


Chart illustrates toxicants applied to all properties except relocation sites.

Courtesy APHIS-WS.

Kansas request, the agency began using lead free bullets in 2012 to reduce lead poisoning of raptors and other scavengers.

As a service to neighboring landowners, and at no cost to them, prairie dogs have been annually controlled by APHIS-WS staff out to a distance of nearly four miles in every direction from the BFF reintroduction sites. Conservation funding has been used to pay for the service. Considering that prairie dog colonies were scattered throughout the area prior to 2007, there is a case to be made for the fact that the BFF reintroduction has not been detrimental to the economic interests of landowners in the vicinity. In fact, the control measures have been favorable for most.

Larry Haverfield also built an electric fence along 22 miles of boundary to preclude grazing and allow a vegetative barrier to grow to reduce dispersal. In addition, Audubon of Kansas built ten miles of prairie dog barrier fence along sections of the boundary. They are effective at reducing emigration of prairie dogs in those more challenging odds.

However, it seems that none of the accommodations made by the wildlife agencies and their partners have provided

any satisfaction to the Logan County Commissioners – one of whom said in court that his objective was to eliminate all the prairie dogs. Along with other avid opponents, they have insisted that Rozol be used to control prairie dogs. They know that it kills predators, including ferrets, and that may be one of their motives. In 2010, AOK and Defenders of Wildlife received assurance from the then-regional director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service that use of Rozol would be discontinued for boundary control. Unfortunately, a new representative of USFWS and his Kansas colleague yielded to the insistence of the commissioners to allow APHIS to use Rozol if requested starting in the fall of 2012. Burrows just across the pasture fences from the BFF recover sites are now treated with Rozol paid for with conservation funds. Ferrets travel, sometimes miles in a night, and if they eat poisoned prairie dogs they are likely to perish as well. It is a new *“worst hard times”* for these rare native mammals.

A total of 22 Black-footed Ferrets were observed during the fall 2013 night spotlight survey. Seventeen of the 22 ferrets were observed on the Haverfield/Barnhardt/Blank Ranch

complex. Five were seen on the Smoky Valley Ranch. Three years earlier 58 BFFs were tallied in the fall survey, 44 on the Haverfield Ranch and 14 on the TNC property.

The decision to use Rozol wasn't very encouraging for the real conservation heroes – the landowners hosting the reintroduction who have spent tens of thousands of dollars making it possible. They weren't even told. We are now hoping that USFWS staff do not continue to buy into the notion – designed by KDWPT's secretary to give priority deference to opponents – that more prairie dogs need to be killed on the Haverfield Ranch, specifically to reduce the occupied acreage to 5,700 acres and further diminish the density.

Even if BFFs were not dependent on this prairie dog colony complex, the goal of the Kansas Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation and Management Plan has been to maintain biologically viable populations of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs at selected sites across the historical range in Kansas. One of five conservation strategies included in the plan is to *“Maintain one complex greater than 5000 acres.”* The prairie dog complex on the Haverfield Ranch Complex is the only complex of that size remaining in Kansas.

This complex has also proven to be the most promising BFF recovery project in the state and central Great Plains. Five litters of pups were born there in 2012.

It is appropriate for the KDWPT Secretary and other agency administrators to consider the views of wide array of elected officials and politicians, and hopefully other stakeholder as well. However, it is not proper for the agency's mission of wildlife conservation to be eclipsed by the political pressure of the most radical fraction. One wonders if potential chapters on BFF, prairie dogs and prairie-chickens are playing out now for a sequence to Todd Wilkinson's book, *SCIENCE UNDER SIEGE, The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth*.

Although wildlife agency staff may feel

Ultimately, man "needs another kind of farming by which he can satisfy his needs without making a wasteland."

– Donald Worster, author of Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s

like they are between a rock and a hard place, we expect them to be rock solid when it comes to standing for sound biological science and their respective agency's mission.

— Ron Klataske

*When the sun came shining,
and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving
and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice
was chanting:
This land was made for you
and me.*

—Woody Guthrie. 1944 lyrics



Ron Klataske photo

Black-tailed Prairie Dog pups. Prairie dog colonies are key to establishment of Black-footed Ferret populations in the wild.

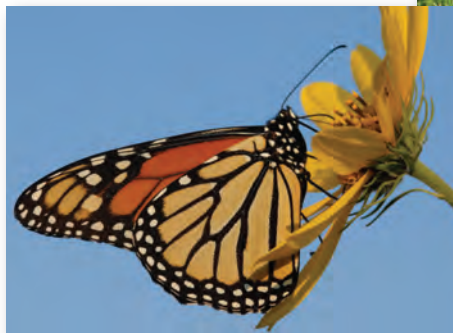
Highway Roadside Vegetation Increasingly Important —But Some Roadsides Harbor an Invasive Threat

Roadsides are certainly “humble places,” and we believe they can readily be managed to offer natural beauty for everyone’s enjoyment. At least everyone except those who choose to “see nothing” or regard natural vegetation that is not mowed as “unkept.” Fortunately, major strides for ecologically and economically commendable policies have been made in recent years:

* Governor Sam Brownback met with conservation leaders on this subject again this past summer. He expressed his continued support for reduced mowing policies to the conservation community, and administrative staff in KDOT is aware of his perspective.

* Administrative staff in KDOT headquarters in Topeka generally support the limited mowing policies included in the Aesthetics Task Force report of 2008 (and similar policies already on the books at that time).

* It was widely recognized within KDOT that the \$6 million spent annually on mowing in previous years could be substantially reduced; in our opinion surely to a third of that while retaining *all necessary mowing*.



Monarch Butterflies are in danger because of habitat loss, deforestation in Mexico and elimination of milkweed—their main food source—in the U.S. County roadsides are needlessly sprayed with herbicides, and until recently KDOT roadsides were repeatedly mowed. This impressive stand of milkweeds was along K177 in the Flint Hills.

