

Prairie dogs divide Efforts to control rodent overpopulation should not include poison

Editorial by Patrick Lowry

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While the city of Oakley might lay claim to the "world's largest prairie dog," it's the southwest corner of Logan County that some would argue is the site of the world's largest prairie dog fight.

Who would have guessed that a foot-high indigenous rodent could cause such a mountain of controversy. That there are a lot of these critters populating northwest Kansas is not in question. Shorter grass, most likely caused by the current drought and in some cases by overgrazing, is ideal habitat for the prairie dog. And they're taking full advantage.

This is not a desirable situation for many in Logan County and even a few in rural Ellis County, where a 400-acre colony has attracted much attention. Others don't find the prairie dogs a problem at all; it's part of a natural ecosystem that has its ups and downs.

Yet this is a battle with more than two sides. The best we can tell, there are at least five distinct camps putting forth strong arguments. With probably too much oversimplification, here are their positions:

--Let nature take its course. Eventually the prairie dogs' food sources will dwindle to the point the rodents will move elsewhere. Alternately, predators of the prairie dogs eventually will thin out the colonies.

--Use controlled shootings to reduce the population. Logan County entrepreneurs have been developing this as viable economic development over the past years. Hunters relish the challenge.

--Poison the prairie dogs with Rozol. While highly effective, the danger is very real that residual poisoning will take place in their predators -- swift fox, burrowing owls, ferruginous hawks and rattlesnakes.

--Poison them with zinc phosphide, which eliminates the residual poisoning but increases the chance of other animals being poisoned directly by eating it.

--Using barriers such as buffers of taller grass or actual fences to keep prairie dogs in or out.

Complicating matters even further are talks by the Audobon of Kansas' attempt to reintroduce black-footed ferrets into Logan County. This ferret, which hasn't been seen in Kansas since the 1950s, is a natural predator of the prairie dog. The ferret wouldn't be introduced in connection with the current prairie dog population problem, but as the country's most endangered mammal the ferret could bring bureaucratic issues of its own.

And then there's a 105-year-old state statute that grants counties (actually townships) the authority to take whatever steps necessary to eradicate properties of prairie dogs and bill the property owners.

Logan County commissioners have approved using Rozol as of Oct. 1. Ellis County commissioners are soliciting bids for Rozol use, although they said the county will not administer the poison program.

We don't believe that poison is the correct route to take. While the ecosystem is obviously out of balance with the current prairie dog population, eradicating an entire segment will throw other parts of nature out of balance.

Instead, we would highly recommend a three-pronged approach to this complex situation.

First, expand the controlled shootings. There are many hunters and sportsmen in the region who would be more than willing to help thin the herd while engaging in one of their favorite activities. This technique might need to be utilized more than once; local wildlife management personnel can make recommendations as to how often.

Second, encourage and financially support the natural buffer zones in affected areas. While more long-term in nature, this is the most environmentally friendly approach to take.

Third, the Kansas Legislature needs to relinquish state authority to local governments so they can solve their own unique problems. What might work in Logan County is not necessarily what's best for Ellis County.

Bottom line, we should not let short-term solutions create possibly even bigger problems in the long run.

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