



Prairie Dog on Greenwald Ranch. All photos by Mike Corn.

STANDING GROUND:

WITH PRAIRIE DOGS IN LANE COUNTY

Mike Corn

Prairie dogs are a keystone species in the shortgrass prairies of the Great Plains. They are a major food source for raptors including Golden Eagles and Swainson's and Ferruginous Hawks, for Burrowing Owls, who also use their abandoned burrows as nesting sites, and for other predators native to a healthy ecosystem. But the history of prairie dog/human relationships has been fraught, ever since the first European settlers invaded the prairie dogs' territories. Kansas, in particular, has on the books antiquated laws dating back to 1901, mandating eradication of the little rodents on the orders or at the hands of County Commissioners. AOK has advocated for years on behalf of prairie dogs and the ranchers who choose to give them a refuge on their land—not only because of the central role of members of the *Cynomys* genus in native prairie ecosystems, but

also because flourishing prairie dog towns are crucial for the successful reintroduction of the endangered Black-Footed Ferret, a species that was on the brink of extinction by the end of the last century.

You can read about the recent history of AOK's struggles in back issues of *Prairie Wings*, which can be accessed at <https://www.audubonofkansas.org/> under the drop-down menu "Publications"; see particularly *PW* Fall/Winter 2011, "Conservation of prairie dogs and Reintroduction of Black-footed Ferrets Requires Courage," by Ron Klataske; *PW* Winter 2012/Spring 2013, "AOK Applauds Appeals Court Decision;" *PW* Spring/Summer 2014, "The New Hard Times for Black-footed Ferrets in Kansas," by Ron Klataske; *PW* Fall 2015/Spring 2016, "Larry Saves the Prairie" and "Larry Haverfield:



Greg Greenwald, whose 3,600-acre Lane County ranch was the subject of an August visit by the Lane County Commission.



Greg Greenwald looks ahead as he leads a small convoy of vehicles on a tour of his Lane County Ranch to survey the areas where he has prairie dogs.

Memories of a True Conservationist,” by Randy Rathbun; *PW* 2018, “Prairie Dogs Bring Out the Worst and Best in Wildlife Stewardship,” by Ron Klataske; and *PW* 2020, “Ron K on BFF Restoration & Prairie Dog Struggles.”

This report by Mike Corn on a recent visit by Lane County Commissioners to the ranch of Greg Greenwald shows that while tensions still exist and some landowners remain unreconciled to the presence of prairie dogs in their vicinity, there are still ranchers like Greenwald who will fight to control their own property and protect the “dogs.” More hopefully, unlike earlier episodes, civil compromise and establishing measures of control seem in this instance to have achieved a peace, or at least a truce, between the contending parties.

However, Mike’s reporting also highlights the struggles that ranchers like Greenwald face in addition to complaints about their prairie dogs, in these times of severe and sustained drought and economic challenges to their livelihood by climate change.

- Intro by M. L. Donnelly, Editor-in-Chief

ALAMOTA — Greg Greenwald didn’t mince words when Lane County Commissioners visited his home last August 15th to talk prairie dogs. It’s his right, the 75-year-old rancher said, to determine how he operates his 3,600-acre ranch, including managing the prairie dogs that inhabit about half of the acres. Perhaps more importantly, given the topic at hand at the time, Greenwald said he’s held up his end of an agreement made in 2018 with the then-sitting commissioners. It was an agreement aimed at limiting or eliminating adverse effects neighbors might see from his decision to let prairie dogs thrive on his land.

After discussing a recent neighbor’s complaint and touring the property on a day when the temperature soared above the century mark, commissioners suggested a few alterations, such as extending a barrier fence that is designed to let grass grow and discourage prairie dogs from crossing over onto adjacent property. Greenwald also plans to repair raptor perches, damaged by high winds, and said he would this fall again poison — with Rozol— prairie dog burrows that are closest to adjoining properties where there are signs of encroachment. As a means

of controlling the prairie dog population, he also continues to take reservations, sought primarily by out-of-state hunters, who target the animals. In the wake of the 2018 discussion and subsequent agreement with commissioners concerning prairie dog control, Greenwald has asked the more than 200 hunters who visit his ranch each year between May and October to keep track of the number of animals they kill. He said the numbers they report suggest anywhere from 18,000 to 20,000 prairie dogs are shot each year. “It’s been a slaughter out there,” he said, “but no hawks or eagles have died out there.” The use of poison to kill prairie dogs is a bigger threat than other control measures because of the danger of residual deaths to other animals. Those deaths occur if prairie dogs don’t die in the burrow. They then can be eaten by hawks and eagles, which are federally protected wildlife, as well as by coyotes or foxes. Greenwald said he refuses to use anything other than Rozol, an anticoagulant. The other poisoning methods include Phostoxin, a deadly gas that kills everything in the burrow and is especially hazardous, or zinc phosphide, a poison-laced grain. The latter treatment, he said, was not effective when he last used it, and is a threat to birds that pick up the grain.

Thoughts of deaths of other species, notably eagles, prompted Angie Reisch, Lane County’s game warden, to ask commissioners about what action might be taken as a result of the tour. **If the prairie dogs are poisoned, she said, and any eagles were killed, she would investigate, as eagles and hawks are protected by federal laws.** Greenwald also wanted to know what the outcome of the meeting might be, but was told by Commissioner Cody Vincent, “We’re not going to make you do anything.” Commission Chairman Kiley Beach said he would talk to the neighbor who complained and

detail steps Greenwald is taking to limit movement of prairie dogs. Commissioner Godfried “Bud” Newberry was in agreement that Greenwald was abiding by the 2018 agreement.

By virtue of powers originally given to township boards by the Kansas Legislature in 1901 and only slightly modified over the years, County Commissioners have the power to poison prairie dogs if a landowner won’t; they can then send the owner a bill. If the bill isn’t paid, the money due can be applied as a lien on the property.

Prairie dogs almost always elicit strong emotions, either for or against the animals. Generally, farmers loathe them, and strongly object to their presence — even if it’s on another person’s property.

Estimates are hard to come by, but it’s thought that as many as 2 million acres of land were inhabited by prairie dogs in 1903. By 1989, that number had plummeted to little more than 46,000 acres. By 2008, a new survey method suggested the number was closer to 85,933 acres, still a 96 percent reduction from 1903.

At the outset of the recent meeting, Beach said the commissioners, none of whom were on the commission in 2018, were merely trying to do their due diligence after receiving a complaint from the landowner adjacent to Greenwald. That landowner had wheat planted this year and complained about damage caused by prairie dogs.

On the tour, Greenwald told commissioners that the border fence is designed to limit grazing by cattle,



After showing Lane County commissioners the border fence he built following a 2018 agreement with then-sitting commissioners, Greg Greenwald, near the center, points in the direction of the next stop on a recent tour to talk about his efforts to prevent prairie dogs from crossing over onto neighboring lands.

allowing the grass to grow taller, which discourages prairie dogs from passing through it. They avoid taller grass, which makes it harder for them to spy predators. Growth of the grass has been affected by the drought, and the buffalo grass that predominates on Greenwald's property is not prone to tall growth. "Mother nature has not cooperated," Greenwald said. "The grass has not grown." Greenwald said he is working with a state wildlife biologist in the search for taller grasses.

As noted, Greenwald also found that he's going to have to extend the border fence, as prairie dogs have expanded into an area beyond the current stretch of fence.

This year's drought and persistent heat not only affected the growth of grass, allowing the prairie dogs to expand their towns; they affected Greenwald's bottom line by forcing him to round up cattle grazing on his ranch, moving them three weeks prior to the meeting, and

putting them into a feedlot to be fattened. He said between 400 and 600 head of cattle graze his ranch each year. Rain has been sparse in recent years, other than two years ago, and snowfall is a rarity anymore. Moreover, he said he didn't even try growing wheat this year. "I didn't even plant any wheat last year because last September with my (soil) probe I couldn't even get it in the ground."

During his meeting with commissioners, Greenwald heralded his efforts to attract hunters, citing their need for out-of-state hunting licenses and the money they spend in Dighton. **But above all else, Greenwald said he's willing to stand his ground in defense of his way of managing his property—and the resident prairie dogs.** "I'm an old Russian," Greenwald said, pronouncing it as "Rooshian." "I'm not going to let anyone run over me."