

## QUICK FACTS:

### Prairie Dogs and Plague

#### **PRAIRIE DOGS DO NOT TRANSMIT DISEASE TO HUMANS!**

In the wild, prairie dogs are the victims of only one disease, plague. Plague was introduced to the west by settlers near the turn of the century and, "...we gave it to the prairie dogs."<sup>1</sup> It was first discovered in New Mexico in 1938<sup>2</sup>. This non-native disease is spread by fleas and is carried into prairie dog towns by other animals such as mice, coyotes, and domestic dogs and cats. **All** mammals are capable of contracting plague. Once the fleas are present in a prairie dogs colony, the entire town will perish within days, and individuals live for only a few hours. Thus, if plague is present, there are no active prairie dogs within about one week's time. Plague has not been documented in the City of Albuquerque. It is difficult for urban prairie dogs to contract plague since the urbanization limit's the number of mammals that frequent the colony.

Proven cases of human plague contracted from prairie dogs are virtually non-existent. The Centers for Disease Control and the department of health continually reinforce this fact. The CDC's official position on destroying Prairie Dogs to control plague is, " We do not recommend routine destruction of prairie dog colonies."<sup>3</sup> One CDC report specifically on plague says, "Plague in *Cynomys Gunnisoni* (Gunnison's Prairie Dog) is devastating. Mortality during a plague epizootic typically exceeds 99%. Although mortality is great and flea infection rates may reach tremendous levels, human cases resulting from prairie dog plague are relatively few....and result from direct contact with an infected animal...*Opisocrostis* spp, (the fleas), may be reluctant to bite humans"<sup>4</sup>.

Cases of people contracting plague from live prairie dogs are non-existent. People who have been known to contract plague from prairie dogs can be traced to handling the corpse of an infected animal.<sup>5</sup> Some states have no record of anyone ever contracting disease from prairie dogs. The chances of contracting plague from a live prairie dog are so infinitesimally slim, it is simply a non-issue. Fleas will only seek a new host if the original host is deceased. For this reason, The Colorado Department of Health states, "**...poisoning of burrowing rodents should not be routinely employed because this could release fleas into the environment and cause an increased risk to humans and pets.**"<sup>6</sup> Poisoning causes fleas to leave prairie dogs and other rodents in their burrows. This is the only time when a human health risk becomes a factor. Common sense points to the fact that having dozens of corpses present in an area is not a healthy environment for human activity.

In contrast, everyone who regularly works with prairie dogs is vitally healthy. The writers of this plan have handled thousands of prairie dogs and they are all alive and well today. Nobody who regularly works with prairie dogs has ever suffered health complications of any kind. Though nearly impossible, if plague did strike in our times, plague is not synonymous with death. The disease can be treated with modern antibiotics and recovery rate is high, recovery time fairly brief.

Existing prairie dog colonies in Albuquerque neither have plague or would infect humans. One value of 'city dogs' is that if there is a large plague outbreak in an ecologically significant colony, these healthy animals can be reintroduced to prevent the collapse of the ecosystem.

Plague can be controlled or prevented by using proper flea powder in prairie dog burrows once or twice per year.<sup>7</sup> This practice is common in New Mexico and is generally conducted by the Department of Health or Environmental Divisions.

May we take this opportunity to reinforce the fact that prairie dogs are not able to become infected by or transmit any other disease including rabies or hanta virus.

Plague is just another, tremendous threat against the survival of prairie dogs and their ecosystem. Gunnison's prairie dogs, the variety in Albuquerque, are down to about 2% of their historical range<sup>8</sup> and are under consideration for listing under the Endangered Species Act<sup>9</sup>.

### **Literature Cited**

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