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Yvonne Boudreaux  
President

PO Box 14235  
Albuquerque, NM 87191  
(505) 296-1937  
[www.prairiedogpals.org](http://www.prairiedogpals.org)  
[prairiedogpals@comcast.net](mailto:prairiedogpals@comcast.net)

## GUIDELINES FOR THE CAPTURE AND RELOCATION OF PRAIRIE DOGS

This document establishes the best practices protocols, followed by Prairie Dog Pals for the humane capture, staging and relocation of prairie dogs.

### 1) CAPTURE:

The capture and relocation of prairie dogs should only be undertaken as a last resort to insure the survival of the colony.

Capture can occur during the following periods:

- After emerging from hibernation but before breeding season (approximately March).
- 10 days after the pups have emerged from the burrows and are of a sufficient mobility and size to safely tolerate relocation (approximately mid June).
- Up to two months prior to hibernation (mid September) depending on the weather and the elevation.
- Timing of capture in the day should not occur before prairie dog families, especially with newly emerging pups are observed above ground for the day.

There are only two acceptable and humane methods of capturing prairie dogs: Flushing and Trapping. The use of vacuum equipment is neither humane nor effective and should be prohibited for all species of prairie dogs.

## Flushing method

- Equipment: A water tanker and attached pump capable of delivering water at a suitable pressure to create foam. A vehicle to tow the tanker. Hoses, nozzles, towels for drying the prairie dogs, saline solution for rinsing out soap and grit from the eyes, dye for marking families, sufficient number of kennels filled with timothy hay for holding the prairie dogs and family groups, duct tape and sharpies for keeping records of the prairie dogs captured.
- The soap to water ratio should be not less than 7 liters to 500 gallons of water which creates a highly foamy (less watery) mixture. The soap should be biodegradable and non-toxic such as Crystal White by Palmolive.
- Fresh, clean water should be used for flushing. If tertiary treated or river water is used, consideration should be given to treating the water with a very low concentration of chlorine or other suitable chemical. The use of contaminated water presents a risk to both the prairie dog and people.
- The water pressure should be high enough to create a high volume of foam into the burrow with the least amount of water used, for the safety of the prairie dogs.
- The use of a foam-enhancing device such as a tube filled with baffles, to increase the amount of foam, is recommended.
- The prairie dog should be captured by hand or net while working at the flushed burrow. Every effort should be made to prevent a flushed prairie dog from exiting without capture and escaping to another burrow.
- All prairie dogs exiting the same burrow should be marked with a non-toxic dye, such as food coloring, to identify family groups.
- The water temperature used for flushing should not exceed 90 degrees or fall below 65 degrees for the safety of the prairie dogs. Higher temperatures can occur in the length of hose if water is allowed to remain in the hose for extended periods. This high temperature water should be purged before resuming flushing. During early spring the temperature of the supply water should be checked to ensure that it is not too cold for flushing.
- Prairie dogs should be placed in sturdy kennels with wire windows and doors that cannot be chewed through allowing escape.
- Kennels should be filled with fresh timothy (grass hay) to calm the prairie dogs and provide some natural bedding.

- The number of prairie dogs placed in a kennel should not cause crowding. Large kennels can accommodate 15 to 20 prairie dogs depending on the size of the prairie dogs. Large males should be segregated to avoid fighting, but identified to indicate the family group from which they came so that they can be reunited with the family group during relocation.
- Kennels should be marked to identify the area from where the prairie dogs were captured as well as, the number, sex and age (adult/juvenile) of the prairie dogs that the kennel contains. Duct tape and sharpies provide a waterproof durable record for the kennel for the day.
- Kennels should be kept out of direct sunlight to avoid heat stress.
- Kennels should be covered with wet towels if ambient temperature exceeds 90 degrees. On days when morning temperatures exceed 90 degrees consideration should be given to a midday transfer of the prairie dogs to the staging facility to avoid heat stress.
- Prairie dogs should be dried off completely after flushing to avoid hypothermia or shock.
- Eyes should be treated with saline solution to remove any soap solution or grit.
- A field exam should be conducted to separate any injured, wounded or disabled prairie dogs to a small treatment carrier for later first aid.
- Prairie dogs should be transported in a closed, air-conditioned (or appropriately heated during the winter) vehicle.
- The capture crew must keep accurate records because an imbalance in the male to female ratio could indicate that:
  - An absence of female captures during the pre breeding season may indicate that pregnancy has already occurred. The appearance of enlarged nipples may help to indicate that the females are pregnant.
  - Post pup season that some nursing mothers and pups are not yet mobile.

### Live trap capture method

Live traps should be single or double door entry and size appropriate for the species. Prairie dog traps are approximately six to eight inch square at the doors and between eighteen to twenty-four inches long.

- The trapper should survey the site to plot out the family groups prior to capture.
- The trapper should make notations of active burrows and prairie dog activity (with binoculars) to assess family groups.
- The number of traps used should be verified before setting, during, and at final collection.
- All traps should be set for 100% visibility at all times.
- Traps should be set near the active burrows.
- Traps should be “planted” so the bottom is slightly buried in dirt. Consideration should be given to staking or anchoring the traps if they are likely to be upturned by trap-savvy prairie dogs.
- Each trap should be tested to verify it is in working order when baiting.
- Each trap should be baited for the requirements of the specific site.
- “Teaser” food may be used as appropriate. Teaser food, if used, should be placed to lead up to the entrance of the trap.
- Trappers should allow fifteen to thirty minutes for the prairie dogs to resume activities after disturbances.
- The traps can be relocated at appropriate intervals (disturbances, picking up a trap) if prairie dogs are inactive in one area.
- The site or the traps should never be left unattended.
- The trapper should immediately walk, not run (not directly to avoid panicking the prairie dog), towards the trap with the captured prairie dog and cover the trap with a heavy towel.
- The trapper should carry the covered trap by the handle or the ends without extending fingers through the wire.
- The prairie dog should be transferred from the trap to the hay-filled kennel using a second person as a spotter by inserting trap into the kennel set on its end and then opening the bottom door of the trap (two person job).
- Kennels should be marked to identify the area from where the prairie dogs were captured as well as number, sex and age (adult/juvenile) of the prairie dogs that the kennel contains. Duct tape and sharpies provide a waterproof durable record for the kennel for the day.
- Individual prairie dogs should be marked with food coloring if more than one family is placed in the same kennel.
- Trappers should place holding kennels in a protected location away from exposure to the elements and potential passers-by.

- Trappers should collect all traps at the end of the session, confirming and reconfirming the numbers of traps used. Left over bait may be left near burrows for remaining prairie dogs.

## 2) STAGING:

Prairie dogs should be staged for a period up to one week prior to relocation. This period will allow for observation and feeding prior to relocation. Prairie dogs can lose up to 30% of their body mass during the relocation process so good nutrition is important. They can be relocated providing their health and weight conditions are good.

Prairie dogs captured from a day's trapping or flushing require several steps of processing before being transferred into the holding facility.

- All used hay from the capture kennels should be removed, bagged and disposed of in an appropriate manner.
- Prairie dogs are to be transferred to the timothy hay filled livestock tanks. Fresh timothy hay should be placed in the livestock tank to approximately half the height of the tank to allow transferred prairie dogs to burrow below for their comfort. Alfalfa is not recommended because the curling nature of the leaf as it dries can harbor bacteria.
- Livestock tanks should be not less than 30" high. Custom fitted hardware cloth lids (not chicken wire) framed in wood should be constructed to prevent any prairie dog from escaping by clinging to the hardware cloth lid and nosing through the gap. Gallon jugs filled with water placed on cross panels may be used to weight lids. Livestock tanks may be placed on furniture dollies to facilitate the ease of processing, feeding, and transfer.
- The prairie dogs should be processed into the staging facility as follows:
  - The prairie dogs should be examined using a "2-4-20" examination protocol; 2 eyes in good condition, 4 canine teeth in straight alignment and proper length, 20 toes without wounds, scrapes or broken toe nails. The body weight and condition should be noted at the same time. Any prairie dogs with wounds, injuries or chronic disabilities should be noted and treated accordingly. Prairie dogs that fit into this compromised category should be placed into a treatment

cage for first aid and monitoring. Processing staff should use Betadine, hydrogen peroxide, etc., or veterinary care as required.

- The age and sex of the prairie dogs should be noted again, checked against the kennel tally, and along with the capture date and location, recorded on a temporary tape strip (duct tape) or clipboard attached to the livestock lid. The total number of prairie dogs categorized by adult male/female, juvenile male/female should be checked, verified, and recorded to assist in determining the amount of food dispensed.
- The prairie dogs should be staged within family groups with one exception. Adult males should be separated from the females and juveniles while in the staging facility and noted accordingly regarding the family group from which they originated. Any special observations or conditions should be noted and dated on the temporary tape strip or clipboard.
- Prairie dogs may be fed a combination of apples, carrots, sunflower seeds and timothy hay while being prepared for relocation at the staging facility. Underweight or stressed prairie dogs should have their diets supplemented with corn, high protein food such as unsalted peanuts in the shell or other dietary formulae to encourage growth. Food should be provided in gnaw-proof, tip-proof containers to avoid contaminating fresh dry hay with moist food.
- Bowls of water or water dispensers are not required, and are in fact, inappropriate, as spillage may contaminate the hay. Sufficient fruit and vegetables, in appropriate containers provide sufficient moisture for this drought tolerant species.
- The fruit and vegetables provided should comprise at least 4 oz per prairie dog per day, (hence the accurate head count requirements per livestock tank), plus all the timothy hay and sunflower seeds the family groups could consume. The formula of 4 oz per prairie dog per day is appropriate until end of season relocations are staged. Staged prairie dog family groups being relocated near the end of the season can be observed to consume less food, if they are already of a sufficient body weight and condition for hibernation.
- As end of season relocations are staged, the moist food provided may be reduced to approximately 2-3 oz per prairie

- dog per day, with no decrease in the amount of sunflower seeds or hay provided.
- Every precaution should be taken to avoid attracting flies to the moist food and resulting feces. Fly strips/traps should be hung at appropriate intervals to minimize the chance of prairie dogs being compromised by fly attacks.
  - Day-old food is to be removed and replaced with fresh food daily.
  - Spoiled hay (wet, contaminated, flattened) is to be removed and disposed of in an appropriate manner and replaced with fresh hay as needed until final transfer to the relocation site.
  - In the event of a suspicious death post capture (not attributable to injury or poisoning), the remains are to be provided to the State Diagnostic Testing Office at UNM (where PDP has an account) for a necropsy.

### 3) SITE DEVELOPMENT:

An appropriate site should be selected for the relocation area. There are a number of factors to consider such as:

- Appropriate soil conditions
- Appropriate short grass vegetation
- A proper mix of prairie grasses and conditions
- Suitable conditions for predators, rolling countryside, some trees for raptors
- Good drainage
- Absence of an active prairie dog population (abandoned burrows are acceptable)
- Documented historical prairie dog habitat
- No political or legal constraints

#### Definitions:

- **Cage Cap:** A six sided hardware-cloth enclosure approximately 12” square and 24” long with a hole in one side that fits over the tubing. The cage cap is typically filled 1/2 full with timothy hay when in use. The six sided cage cap is replaced by a 5 sided or bottomless cage cap during the relocation process when the prairie dogs are ready for release.
- **Tubing:** 4” corrugated plastic tubing that connects the subterranean nesting box to the surface.

- Nesting box: A sturdy container, usually a 15-25 gallon nursery pot (injected not blow molded) that serves as a temporary residence for the prairie dogs during the relocation process. The open end of the pot is covered with hardware cloth and 2, 4" slotted holes, are cut into the side and top to accommodate the 4" tubing. Fill the nesting box 1/2 full of timothy hay before it is set in place. The hay will act as bedding for the prairie dogs. The pot is set top down into the excavated hole.
- End cap: Plastic cap used to close the tubing and prevent access by other prairie residents.

Once an area has been selected the site is prepared as follows.

- Develop a plan that reflects the areas, coterries, and number of burrows for the prairie dogs that are to be relocated.
- Using a backhoe, excavator, or auger dig out a subterranean space for the artificial burrows. The bottom of the hole should be approximately 4' deep. This will ensure that the nesting box is sufficiently buried to maintain constant temperature and to reduce the possibility of being dug up by coyotes or wild dogs.
- Set the artificial burrow and backfill. Restore vegetation or plant new grass as appropriate to the area. Cap the tubes to prevent occupation by unwanted species.
- Care should be taken to minimize damage to the surrounding areas and to restore natural vegetation (at the excavated area) by replanting or reseeding.

#### 4) RELOCATION:

Prairie dogs that have been observed within their family groups for approximately one week and meet the health, weight, and body condition requirements suitable for relocation may be released to the artificial burrows at the relocation site. Juveniles relocated within their family groups must be a minimum of 350 grams (14 ounces) before being relocated.

- The prairie dogs are health checked one last time, placed into marked kennels according to their family groups at the staging area then transported to the relocation site. Once at the site, the prairie dogs are placed into the tubing leading to the nesting box one by one. Ensure that the prairie dogs actually go down the tube and



- into the nesting box as sometimes they will stop and block the tubing. When this occurs either use the other tube or wait until the prairie dog has moved down the tube. Do not allow them to back up in the tubing as they can suffocate.
- After each group is placed into their artificial burrow, an above ground cage cap is attached to the tubing to contain the animals. Sufficient favorite foods are placed in containers in the cage cap. The cage cap should be fixed in place using stakes. This will prevent the cage cap from becoming dislodged prematurely.
  - The prairie dogs remain in these structures for up to one week. Daily feeding and replenishing of the hay is conducted.
  - When the time is appropriate, the cage caps are removed from the tubing leading to the artificial burrows. They are replaced with a 5 sided or bottomless cage cap that will allow the prairie dogs to dig out while still affording them some protection. A minimum of two days of intensive monitoring is required to insure the prairie dogs commit to digging home burrows within the accepted release area.
  - Predator monitoring and non-lethal discouragement may be conducted, such as installing fencing around the release area.
  - Regular monitoring is to be conducted while daily feeding is ongoing.
  - Ongoing maintenance efforts may require regular flea dusting around burrows bi-annually.
  - Supplemental feeding may be necessary during drought conditions.

## 5) DUSTING

The burrows at the city colonies and relocation area(s) should be dusted with a deltamethrin compound (Delta Dust) bi-annually, in the Spring and Fall. This is a preventative measure to reduce fleas and minimize the possibility of plague. Flea dusting can be excluded at public parks and playing fields to eliminate any risk of exposure to companion animals and humans. These sites are well within the city and the possibility of introducing fleas by wild animals or off leash pets is reduced.

## 6) REPORTING

Biannual reporting should be performed for the release site and for target sites within the city. The reports should be completed prior to pup season (early spring) and after the prairie dogs have gone into hibernation

(late fall). The city report should address the following:

- Active sites
- Site description
- Active/inactive burrows
- Mapping/Plotting/Area Calculation
- Population estimate (pre-season)
- Work estimate (pre-season)
- Removal estimate (pre-season)
- Removals (post-season)
- Dusting can occur concurrent with report preparation

The relocation area report should address the following:

- Active/Inactive burrows
- Vegetation analysis
- Colony health
- Predator analysis
- Soil Survey/Update
- Pictures as appropriate
- Dusting can occur concurrent with report preparation