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What do Prairie Dogs Eat?

Prairie dogs are herbivorous (i.e., they eat plants such as grasses and forbs [grass-like flowering plants]). Prairie dogs also occasionally insects that they find above ground. They do not drink because they get all of the water they need from the plants.



A review of studies on prairie dog food habits shows variable results. Prairie dogs frequently eat the same plant species as cattle and their activities may cause a decrease in grasses normally considered good livestock forage and an increase in forb cover. However, in some instances, prairie dogs may be beneficial to rangeland; plant species diversity and protein content of forage are often greater on prairie dog colonies than off.

- Several studies show that the presence of prairie dogs may benefit livestock through increasing forage digestibility, nutrients and the abundance of forage preferable to livestock (O’Meilia et al.1982; Coppock et al. 1983; Kreuger 1986; Bonham and Lerwick 1976).
- Prairie dogs control mesquite and prickly pear cactus, plants that reduce the forage availability for cattle.
- Uresk (1985) found only a 4-7% level of competition between prairie dogs and livestock.
- Prairie dogs do not significantly threaten the profits of livestock owners, but costs of prairie dog poisoning to the public in the form of externalities are in the millions of dollars.



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- Typically, livestock permittees on public lands pay only 5-10% of the poisoning cost, leaving 90-95% of the cost to taxpayers, a huge externality cost borne to the public. Even at this subsidized rate, it takes at least 40 years for a rancher to pay off the cost of poisoning at low repopulation rates, and at normal prairie dog repopulation rates the benefits of poisoning will never exceed the costs.

Grasses : Wheatgrass; Sand Dropseed; Fescue; Blue Grama; Buffalograss; and, Needleleaf Sedge.

Forbs: Scarlet Globemallow (*Sphaeralcea coccinea*) and Threadleaf Sedge (*Carex filifolia*).

Suitable foods for Urban Prairie Dogs:

Green Leafy Vegetables

Kale

Lettuce (quarters or eighths)

Spinach

Fruits:

Peaches (cut up)

Grapes

Melons (cut up)

Apples (cut up)

Peanuts in shells (not salted)

Grass Hay/Orchard Grass/Timothy Hay*

Corn on the Cob (no husk, cut up)

Fresh Cut Lawn Grass (no fertilizers or pesticides)

Carrots (cut up)

* We do not use alfalfa hay