

2008 Wildlife Surveys

Introduction

During 2008, wildlife surveys at the Rocky Flats Site (the Site) consisted of black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) observations. The Site consists of the Central Operable Unit (COU, which comprises the DOE-retained lands) and the Peripheral Operable Unit (POU), most of which was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to become the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. Black-tailed prairie dogs are not uncommon at the Site, typically inhabiting the lower elevation, deeper-soil areas on the eastern half of the POU and one upper-elevation surface in the northeast corner of the POU where the soils are less rocky. Several prairie dog towns have existed for many years at these locations. Prairie dog towns in the upper elevations of the COU and POU are scarce due to the abundance of rocks in the pediment soils.

From an ecological standpoint the prairie dogs are an important component of the ecosystem, providing food for raptors and coyotes, and also a source natural disturbance to the vegetation communities where the prairie dog towns are located. In recent years conflicts between people and prairie dogs have increased along the Front Range. Prairie dogs are perceived as negatively affecting recreational use and the quality of habitat on public lands. Numerous municipalities along the Front Range have instituted prairie dog relocation programs in attempts to limit outright killing of the prairie dogs. Several of these programs have resulted in prairie dogs being relocated just outside the boundaries of the POU on the eastern and northern boundaries at the Site. At some off-site locations the increase in prairie dog populations has denuded the landscape and created bare soil areas that become sources of large dust clouds during high winds.

Concern with the prairie dog colonies at the Site is not so much ecological; rather, the primary concern is the potential for the prairie dogs to create an erosional surface by removing vegetation cover. Two landfills are present at the Site, the Original Landfill and Present Landfill. The monitoring and maintenance plans for both landfills prohibit the presence of burrowing animals on the landfill covers. Additionally, infrastructure is buried at some locations in the former Industrial Area (IA), and the prairie dogs' natural tendency to dig makes them undesirable at these locations. Thus, observations of the locations and abundance of prairie dogs at the Site are important from a management standpoint. In 2008, the following observations were made and documented regarding the presence of prairie dogs at the Site:

- The locations of prairie dogs towns within the COU and adjacent to the COU fence on POU property.
- The locations of individual prairie dogs observed in the spring when they are roaming in search of potential locations for new prairie dog holes.

Methods

In 2008, two types of prairie dog observations were recorded at the Site. Fortuitous observations of individual prairie dogs roaming in the spring were recorded on a map along with the date they were seen. The general locations of prairie dog towns within the COU and adjacent POU were also mapped.

Results and Discussion

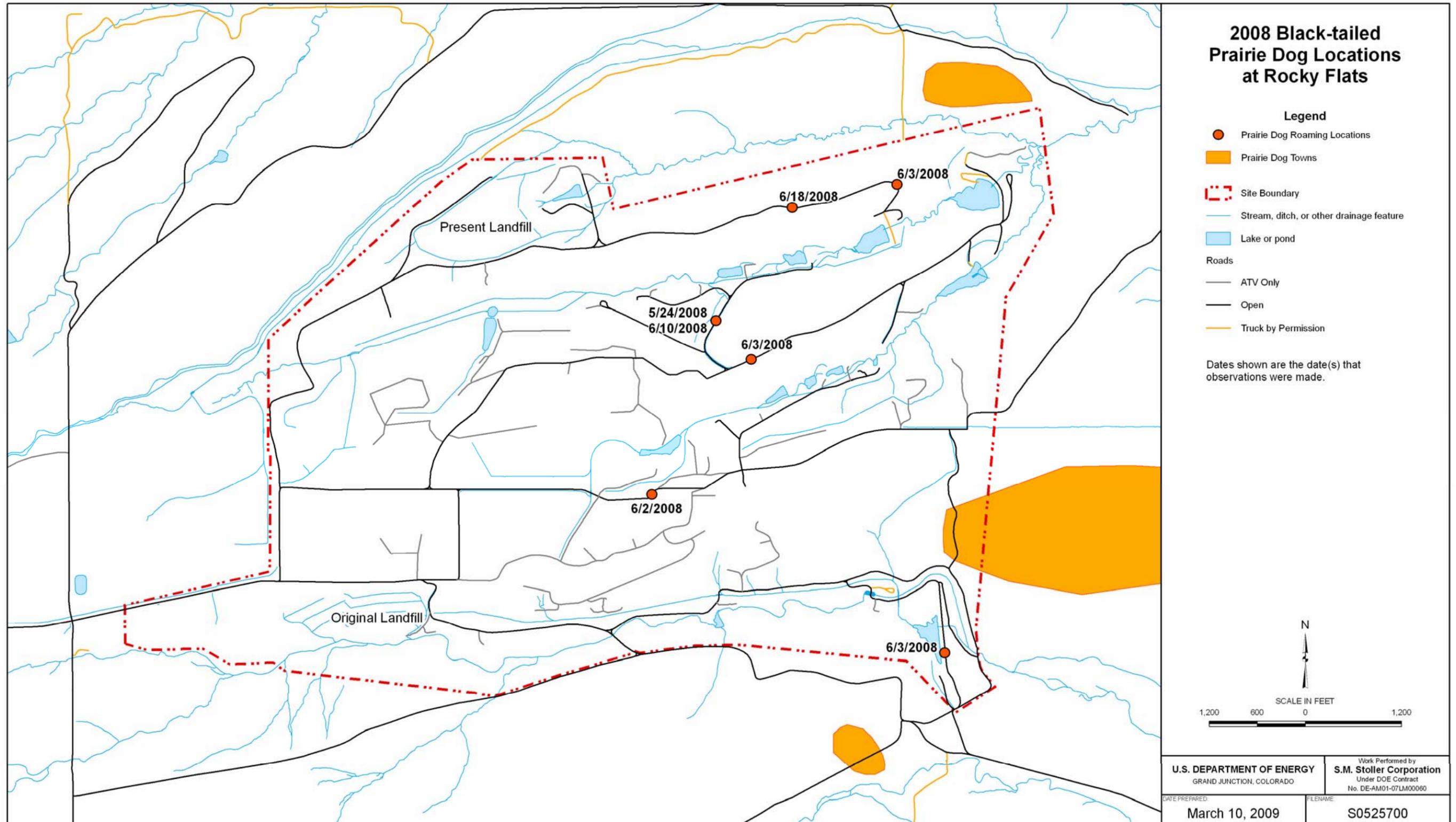
Figure 1 shows the locations of fortuitous observations of prairie dogs roaming in spring 2008. In general, the roaming prairie dogs have been found along the roads where there is good visibility from predators. It is likely that the roads will be the pathway that prairie dogs use to get to potential new prairie dog town locations in the former IA (if that occurs). No active burrows were observed at any of the fortuitous observation locations in 2008.

Figure 1 also shows the locations of prairie dog towns in the COU and adjacent POU in 2008. The prairie dog towns around the perimeter of the COU have continued to expand in size over the last few years (perhaps in response to relocations off site), but no active prairie dog holes have been found yet on either of the landfills or in the former IA.

In 2009, prairie dog monitoring will continue, and a more formal process of monitoring for animal burrows in the sensitive areas of the COU will be developed and implemented. If prairie dogs are found at Site locations where they are not permitted, appropriate measures will be taken in accordance with local regulations and in coordination and consultation with state wildlife officials.

Summary

Black-tailed prairie dogs continued to inhabit the grasslands at the Site, in the surrounding POU, and at one location on the eastern edge of the COU in 2008. Ecologists observed several prairie dogs roaming in spring 2008 along roads in the COU; however, no evidence of active prairie dog holes was found. Monitoring will continue to document the locations of prairie dogs and other burrowing animals in the COU to ensure that no burrowing takes place in areas where it is prohibited or undesired.



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Figure 1. 2008 Black-tailed Prairie Dog Locations at Rocky Flats.