Utah Prairie Dog Issues Synopsis

1. Brief history of endangered status
   a. The Utah prairie dog (UPD), found only in southwestern and central Utah, was listed as an endangered species on June 4, 1973 (38 FR 14678). At the time of listing, the species was threatened by habitat destruction and modification, over-exploitation, disease, and predation.
   b. By 1984 populations increased significantly and the species was reclassified as ‘threatened’ with a special rule to allow regulated ‘take’ of the species.
   c. In 1991 the rule was amended to increase the amount of take allowed throughout the species’ range.
   d. In 2012, the 4(d) rule was revised to allow lethal take in specific areas following installation of barriers and trapping/translocation.

2. Current recovery status
   a. The UPD Recovery Plan was adopted in 2012 specifying recovery standards.
   b. Today UPD populations appear to be relatively stable, although the species remains vulnerable to several serious threats, including habitat loss, plague, changing climatic conditions, unauthorized take and disturbance from recreational and economic land uses.
   c. To meet FWS criteria for recovery there must be 2,000 adult dogs (1,000 counted in UDWR’s annual spring count) and 5,000 acres of protected habitat in each of the three Recovery Units. Protected habitat can be counted on public land as well as private. The three Recovery Units consist of the West Desert (mainly Iron County, part of Beaver County); The Paunsaugunt Plateau (mainly Garfield County, part of Kane); and the Awapa Plateau (mainly Wayne County, parts of Piute and Sevier Counties).
   d. Of the 1,000 counted adult dogs needed in each Recovery Unit to reach recovery, recovery is almost half way there. The 2012 spring count on protected lands:
      i. West Desert: 499 dogs
      ii. Paunsaugunt: 567 dogs
iii. Awapa: 400 dogs

Approximately 70% of all known Utah prairie dogs occur on private lands, the same lands that are prioritized for residential, commercial, and industrial development. In order to reach recovery, dogs must either be protected where they exist on private land through conservation easements, or they must be translocated to public lands to areas of suitable habitat, or a combination of both. A good portion of the habitat on public land requires intensive human inputs to enhance and maintain vegetation characteristics required to sustain UPD population numbers.

3. UPD issues /conflicts

a. Development - The conflict between development and UPD recovery is of most concern in Iron County, though Garfield and Wayne Counties also share this concern. Iron County currently operates under a Habitat Conservation Plan that generally does not provide the necessary “take” of dogs needed for large tracts of occupied habitat. For example, under the current Iron County HCP, Western Quality Foods was allowed 8 dogs take, when they needed 80 dogs over 10 acres of land that they were seeking to expand on. The take issue was one of several other unrelated reasons that the Western Quality Foods expansion did not take place.

Residential developments face the same problem - not enough take for what is needed to clear their land and begin development or sell properties. As a result of this conflict, private landowners who have UPDs on their property have applied to the Tax Commission to have their property taxes lowered.

The solution to the insufficient Iron County HCP, is a new Rangewide HCP that is currently being developed and would cover Iron, Garfield and Wayne Counties. The new HCP would work towards recovery while at the same time allowing for increased amount of take throughout the range. The Rangewide HCP is in awaiting to be submitted to the FWS for approval. The biggest concern with the Rangewide HCP is how to fund it. A portion of the funding could come from mitigation fees applied to private property owners who
want to develop “mapped UPD habitat”, but this causes concern for county commissioners in all three counties, as they feel the mitigation fee shouldn’t be assessed at all. Under the current Iron County HCP there is a $1,000 mitigation fee assessed; if the new Rangewide HCP uses a mitigation fee structure, it would likely be close to that amount or slightly higher, but that would only cover a fraction of the funding needed to implement the HCP.

In Garfield County, Bryce Canyon City (Ruby’s Inn) is dealing with their development needs through application of an incidental take permit through the Bryce Canyon City Habitat Conservation Plan.

b. **Existing Land uses** - Throughout the UPD range, but again, mostly in Iron County there are several existing land uses that are in conflict with the occurrence of UPDs, including the following:
   i. Cemeteries (Paragonah resolved in 2012)
   ii. Paiute Tribal lands Pow Wow grounds
   iii. Cedar City Golf course
   iv. Airports (Parowan resolved in 2012)

Every summer the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources traps and translocates prairie dogs off many of these problem areas where prairie dogs and their burrows create a safety hazard to the public.

The **Cedar City Golf Course** and the Paiute Tribal Lands Habitat Conservation Plan addresses the ‘take’ needs of both of these entities, and in 2012 the incidental take was increased from 300 to 3,100 animals.

The Paiute Tribal lands are adjacent to the **Golf Course** in Cedar City. The Tribe’s take is limited by the population count of prairie dogs on the Wild Pea Hollow mitigation site, which experienced a population crash in 2007. Until the population count goes back up on the mitigation site the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah cannot receive ‘take’ of UPD. Efforts are currently underway to secure funding through a joint Iron County, Paiute Tribe, UDWR, BLM, Cedar City funding proposal for habitat enhancement of two mitigation sites including the Wild Pea Hollow site. The hope is that with the habitat enhancement, and translocation of dogs to Wild Pea Hollow, the UPD
population count will increase to the amount needed for the Tribe to receive ‘take’ on their Tribal lands in Cedar City.

The presence of UPD on several municipal airports throughout the UPD range instigated a Section 7 Consultation between the FAA and the FWS, which resulted in the airports’ ability to carry out their regular safety and maintenance activities on the airport, which result in ‘incidental take’ of UPD.

c. **Agriculture** - currently, farmers are able to sufficiently control prairie dogs on croplands through a 4d permit with the FWS.

4. **Recovery efforts & conflict resolution coordination through the new Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Implementation Program** - In 2010, an unprecedented collaborative partnership developed under the Utah Prairie Dog Recovery Implementation Program (UPDRIP).

   a. The UPDRIP coordinator is hosted by Southern Utah University and funded by contributions and grants from Utah DNR (Endangered Species Mitigation Fund), FWS, BLM, SITLA, and Iron, Garfield and Wayne Counties.

   b. Under UPDRIP, local, state and federal partner agencies work together to coordinate and plan recovery efforts, leverage resources and funding (UPDRIP partners: FWS, BLM, Forest Service, Utah DNR/DWR, SITLA, NRCS and the Panoramaland and Color Country RC&Ds, USU Extension, SUU, Utah Farm Bureau, and Iron, Garfield, and Wayne Counties, as well as some local municipalities including Cedar City).

   c. The UPDRIP 2012 Annual Work Plan and Five Year Strategic Plan incorporate all UPD recovery activities and conflict resolution across the range, which is a first in the history of UPD recovery strategic planning. These Plans will allow tracking and evaluating progress being made towards recovery, to apply adaptive management, and to ultimately reach recovery and de-listing of the species quicker and more efficiently.

   d. UPDRIP partners coordinate the following efforts:

      i. Disease monitoring and management (mainly focused on plague abatement)

      ii. Habitat protection, development, and maintenance

      iii. Genetic integrity, augmentation, and translocation

      iv. Research, monitoring and management
v. Public information, outreach and education
vi. Habitat Conservation Plans (both current implementation and development of the new Rangewide HCP)

vii. UPD conflict resolution
e. **UPDRIP** is modeled after the Virgin River Program (VRP) in Washington County and like the VRP, is set up to receive annual funding commitments from federal and state agencies to direct towards recovery activities. Currently, the Program does not receive funding for recovery activities from state and federal agencies, but it does receive funding for basic operation (for the local coordinator).