

Development and Wildlife Conservation Can Coexist
By Ted Toombs and Chuck Collett

If you want to develop land that provides habitat for endangered or threatened animal species, you often have very time-limited options that make development much more difficult.

Fortunately, now there is a pilot program in Utah that could become a model for communities nationwide seeking to balance development with wildlife habitat conservation.

The program is designed to facilitate private land development and to aid the recovery of the threatened Utah Prairie Dog, so it can be removed from the endangered species list. In fact, 75 percent of the species' population lives on private lands managed by farmers and ranchers.

Development of land near Utah's rapidly expanding cities, like Cedar City in Iron County, is a major source of habitat loss for the Utah Prairie Dog. As a result, developers are required to offset the loss of prairie dog numbers and habitat as part of the Iron County Habitat Conservation Plan.

An innovative, new solution to this challenge is the [Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Credits Exchange Program](#), a new pilot program modeled after a similar program that [Environmental Defense Fund](#) helped develop to save endangered golden-cheeked warblers in Texas.

The Utah program allows developers to offset the loss of Utah Prairie Dog habitat that their development causes by buying credits from private landowners willing to preserve habitats on their properties. Two local non-profit groups—the Panoramaland and [Color Country Resource Conservation & Development Councils](#) (RC&D)—will act as brokers for these credit exchanges and coordinate the Habitat Credits Exchange Program.

The program now is working to acquire Utah Prairie Dog habitat credits from private landowners who meet the minimum qualifications of 40 acres and 20 Utah Prairie Dogs. This winter, 560 credits will be purchased, clearing up to 93 acres for development in Iron County.

The first credits will be available for sale this spring to developers and landowners who want the option to develop their land or to sell it to a developer in the future. Interested parties should contact Erica Wightman in Richfield at updhceprogram@hotmail.com or Elissa Black in Cedar City at elissablack@suu.edu.

The program benefits include:

1. Clearing land of development restrictions in perpetuity;
2. Speeding permitting time and reducing conflicts between developers, municipalities, county government, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service;
3. Providing financial incentives for private landowners--primarily farmers and ranchers--to voluntarily preserve habitat; and
4. Increasing the probability of species recovery.

The program was spearheaded by Environmental Defense Fund and their partner the Utah Farm Bureau, supported by the National Association of Home Builders and U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and funded by a \$400,000 Conservation Innovation Grant from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Many local organizations made the program possible by providing more than \$100,000 in-kind support for the program.

If successful, the program probably will grow in scope and accommodate an increasing number of participants with Utah Prairie Dog Habitat, including landowners in Iron, Kane, Beaver, Garfield, Piute, Wayne and Sevier counties.

The Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Credits Exchange Program should benefit landowners, developers and species recovery. It could result in much quicker recovery and future de-listing of the species. Finally, it could be a model to show that it's possible for development to coexist peacefully with wildlife conservation.

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