

Panoramaland RC&D Council seeks landowners to participate in the Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Credits Exchange program

RICHFIELD, Utah – The Utah Prairie Dog, unique to south-central Utah, is a threatened species federally protected under the Endangered Species Act. The Panoramaland RC&D Council in Richfield and Color Country RC&D Council in Cedar City are non-profit entities working with partners to develop and implement solutions addressing the Utah Prairie Dog issue including a new voluntary pilot program called the Utah Prairie Dog Habitat Credits Exchange Program.

The RC&D is now seeking to identify and make contact with landowners and developers being impacted to participant in the voluntary pilot program. The RC&D will purchase conservation easements established through the program from landowners. The minimum qualification for the program conservation easement is 20 Utah Prairie Dogs inhabiting 40 acres. Land protected under these conservation easements will accrue -Habitat Creditsø which the RC&D will then sell to builders and developers needing to mitigate for loss of habitat. Revenue generated will enable the RC&D to protect additional habitat offsetting continued development impacts.

The program will serve those within Iron, Beaver, Garfield, Kane, Piute, Wayne and Sevier counties, which are known to have habitat for the threatened Utah Prairie Dog. A "threatened" species is one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future if additional protection measures are not implemented. The RC&D intends to assist in recovery, eventually having them removed from the list altogether. Delisting would allow for greater flexibility of future management practices benefiting those being impacted.

The purpose of the program is to encourage and facilitate agricultural producer and developer participation in recovery of the Utah Prairie Dog. Current mitigation systems for endangered species are extremely limited in their ability to contribute to species recovery and to encourage and involve participation of individual agricultural producers. With the majority of endangered the species habitat on private lands, it is essential to develop and implement programs that involve the active participation of private landowners.

The program is the result of a multi-stakeholder public involvement process originating from a Conservation Grant awarded to Environmental Defense Fund from Natural Resources Conservation Service. It is probable the pilot program will grow in scope, be a self-supporting system and be able to accommodate an increasing number of participants. The RC&D would like to acknowledge the continuing efforts and cooperation of their partners including Iron County, Cedar City, Utah Division of Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Utah State University Extension, Utah Farm Bureau and Environmental Defense Fund.

Property owners interested in creating conservation easements or developers in need of clearing land in perpetuity are encouraged to contact the RC&D offices to inquire and obtain an application and more information.

Erica Wightman has been contracted by the RC&D to coordinate this effort and answer questions. She may be contacted by phone at (435) 979-1984, by fax at (435) 896-2002 or by email at UPDHCEprogram@hotmail.com. You may also visit their Web site for additional information at www.panoramalandrcd.org.