

Sucking Up Prairie Dogs

by Martin Holladay

In eastern Colorado, prairie dogs have long been the bane of home builders. If the burrowing rodents, which are classified as destructive pests by the Colorado Department of Agriculture, become established in residential areas, they tend to dig up yards, discouraging home buyers.

"Until recently, most developers bulldozed them or poisoned them," says Mark Brennan, wildlife specialist for the Boulder County Parks and Open Space Dept. Yet some Coloradans find the furry creatures cute and have protested prairie dog poisoning. Builders, wary of negative publicity, have adapted to the new pro-rodent climate, and they now rarely engage in poisoning, especially in

such environmentally conscious cities as Boulder.

However, before new homes can be built on raw land, developers still need to get rid of any resident prairie dogs. Entrepreneurs have risen to the occasion by offering prairie dog relocation services. Most prairie dog relocators use conventional live traps. But one contractor, Gay Balfour of Cortez, Colo., has invented a novel way to collect live prairie dogs: He uses a 4-inch vacuum hose to suck them out of their burrows.

Balfour, who calls his company Dog-Gone, modified a catch-basin cleaning truck (a 1984 Ford F-800) to make it rodent-friendly. "We padded the interior of the tank with foam," says Balfour,

who is careful not to injure the animals. A powerful Detroit diesel engine sucks the small mammals from their burrows into the padded cell at the back of the truck. Balfour has nine years of experience collecting prairie dogs. "I can usually do an acre and a half a day," he says.

Where do we put them? Like other prairie dog relocation contractors, Balfour's biggest headache is finding a good place to release the rodents. Although many people like to see a loaded prairie dog truck drive away, not many people like to see one drive up. "Essentially, no one wants them," says Kent Hogan, vice president of construction for McStain Enterprises, a Boulder, Colo., builder. "It isn't as if there is anyone standing around saying, 'Bring me your homeless prairie dogs.'"

According to Susan Wadhams, communications director for the Colorado Dept. of Natural Resources, even when a landowner is willing to accept prairie dogs, another hurdle remains: placating the neighbors. "Moving prairie dogs is generally not too popular with the neighboring landowners," says Wadhams.

In fact, the migrant rodent controversy got so heated that it reached the Colorado Legislature. When a group of Colorado developers teamed up with environmentalists to buy a 1,280-acre plot of land in remote Baca County, intending to use it to settle relocated prairie dogs, neighboring residents objected to their representatives. In 1999, the Colorado Senate obligingly passed Senate Bill 111, which forbids any prairie dogs to be relocated without the approval of the board of commissioners in the county where the rodents are released. Since the law is clearly intended to put the brakes on prairie dog relocation, builders with prairie dog problems are now looking at an ever-narrowing range of possible solutions.



DOG-GONE

Gay Balfour uses a 4-inch vacuum hose on a converted catch-basin cleaning truck (top) to remove prairie dogs from their burrows. The result of a good day's work: seven cages full of unharmed prairie dogs, ready for relocation (right).



DOG-GONE

