



**INTERIOR SECRETARY** Gale Norton talked Thursday about prairie dogs and cooperation on conservation when editors of the National Newspaper Association went to the Department of the Interior for a briefing. The secretary said the little nuisances won't be listed as endangered any time soon.

— Herald staff photo by Cynthia Haynes

# Prairie dogs not endangered

Interior Secretary Gale Norton has some good news for farmers and ranchers.

The government is not going to list prairie dogs as an endangered species, at least not any time soon.

Norton, pushing the Bush administration agenda, wants more cooperation and less confrontation on environmental issues. Prairie dogs are an example.

Over the last decade, faced with a demand from environmental groups to list the cuddly looking little rodents as threatened or endangered, the Interior Department has spawned a host of studies.

Listing the pests under the Endangered Species Act would make it tough for farmers to control them. You can't just go out and kill an endangered species, even on your own land.

Environmental groups claimed that the black-tailed prairie dog's native range had been reduced by nearly 98 percent by 1960.

The Interior Department asked states where this ground squirrel is native, including Kansas, to survey their population and come up with voluntary management plans.

Norton says one result is the states are finding more prairie dogs out there than people thought. Some landowners are learning to coexist with the creatures, which dig lots of holes in pastures.

There's still probably way too many of the plague-carrying critters for the average rancher, but it's good news if the feds stay away from this issue.

"We are no longer on the verge of listing prairie dogs," Norton said in a briefing Thursday for publishers from the National Newspaper Association.

Ms. Norton, a former attorney general of Colorado and a conservative Republican, says she sees the prairie dog study as an example for cooperation on the environment. States went out, surveyed the public, got landowners' opinion, found where the prairie dogs were. Now they are drawing up plans to manage and protect them while allowing ranchers to keep numbers down.

That's a stark contrast to what happened when environmentalists first pushed to "save" the dogs. It was curtains for thousands of the little puppies.

"Sale of prairie dog poison doubled that year," the secretary said. "Clearly, that's a program that's not working."

One push at Interior under Ms. Norton has been to reduce "hard" or categorical grant programs and put the money into programs where states, the government and private groups cooperate to develop recreation and resources. She calls that "cooperative conservation."

"The administration believed that the key to environmental progress lies in local cooperation," she said. "We can be much more successful in using the carrot rather than the stick."

To that end, she wants to see incentives largely replace penalties under the Clean Air Act. Another initiative is cooperative programs with states and landowners to thin the fuel load in forests and make wildfires more manageable.

Ms. Norton's department manages one in five acres of America and a third of all oil, gas and coal is produced on its land. It runs the national parks and wildlife refuges, major irrigation and power dams (including Sebelius Reservoir near Norton), and handles relations with more than 500 Indian and native Alaskan tribes.

Her talk was heavily illustrated



## Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes  
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with photos of President Bush hiking and climbing in national parks and viewing forest fires with alarm.

And those cute little prairie dogs. She says despite cries from some quarters, the national parks are in

good shape and the department is putting more money into them. Sometimes, park managers have made budget cuts in the most visible places to scare people, she said, like shutting down a visitors' center rather than trimming hours.

"Cuts should be cost driven, not for show," she says. "Every agency in the federal government would like to have more money...."

"But I imagine you as taxpayers would like to have more money than you have, too."

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