

An Update on Conservation in the Janos-Casas Grandes Area

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We live in a rapidly-changing world, and the Janos-Casas Grandes region is no exception. Many changes have occurred between the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2005.

During these years, agriculture has undergone strong regional development. Each year, dozens of new agricultural tracts, watered by center-pivot irrigation systems, have appeared, increasing the production of cotton, potato, chile, cereals, and beans. This growth is not regulated nor planned, factors that have generated important problems. Foremost among them, agricultural tracts are developed on any location where land can be purchased, frequently in prairie dog colonies, where the absence of trees and brush facilitates conversion into farmland. Although because prairie dogs are a protected species in Mexico, the illegal practice of converting prairie dog colonies into farmland is very common, resulting in the loss of many hectares of prime prairie dog habitat. The simultaneous increase in the number of agricultural wells creates concern among residents about the adequacy of the domestic water supply, since agricultural wells are much deeper than the wells that provide water to settlements. Ascensión, Chihuahua is now experiencing a domestic water shortage, a result of excessive industrial agriculture within the *municipio*. Since the new agriculture is high-tech, it renders direct benefits to only a small number of individuals, increasing the area's socio-economic disparity.

Another notable change in the area was the installation in 2004 of an electrical transmission line between Nacozari, Sonora and Nuevas Casas Grandes, Chihuahua.

The transmission line transects the Janos-Casas Grandes prairie dog colony, and crosses an area north of the Sierra Madre Occidental, where until now there have been no infrastructure intrusions, apart from a few roads.

During 2002 and 2003, the area underwent two additional years of drought, which, in conjunction with excessive stocking rates for drought conditions, has led to a noticeable reduction in vegetative cover. The soil has been left exposed and is susceptible to erosion from wind and water - during the infrequent rains. The reduction in vegetation appears to have had a negative effect in many bird species and on the prairie dogs, whose population has diminished noticeably, particularly during the second half of 2003 and the first half of 2004. Since the summer of 2004, rains have been abundant, creating a rapid recuperation of vegetation.

The reintroduction of black-footed ferrets has had promising results. Following the initial releases on October 2, 2001, periodic investigations indicate significant survival for released animals. In the spring of 2002, the first ferret births in Mexico were recorded. Ferret captures, undertaken to determine the animals' condition and to mark the Mexican-born offspring, indicate a fully healthy population, despite a decline in numbers during the spring of 2004, a result of the decrease in prairie dogs, the ferrets' principal source of sustenance. It is hoped that recovery of the prairie dog population will be followed by an increase in the ferret population. In the meantime, reintroduction efforts continue, with the objective of establishing a viable population of black-footed ferrets in the Janos area.