

EXHIBIT 18
DATE 1-25-05
286

January 25, 2005

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

My name is Mat Millenbach and I am from Billings, Montana, House District 56. I am here today representing myself and would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

I would ask you to oppose House Bill No. 286, a bill which would repeal House Bill 492 passed by the 2001 legislature and signed by Governor Martz on May 1, 2001. HB 492 designated prairie dogs as a species in need of management so that they could be conserved and managed consistent with other uses of land and habitat by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

In 2001, I was the Montana State Director for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (I have since retired from the BLM). BLM was an active participant in the Montana Prairie Dog Working Group along with other Federal and State wildlife management agencies, private conservation and stockgrower organizations, and private landowners. One of the issues the working group agreed on was to support HB 492 which was passed by the Montana House and Senate. In 2002, the working group completed its Conservation Plan for Black-Tailed and White-Tailed Prairie Dogs in Montana.

Prairie dogs are an important Great Plains animal whose range has been substantially diminished. Habitat loss, poisoning, the use of live animals for target practice, and disease (sylvatic plague) have combined to reduce the range of prairie dogs to less than 2% of its historic range. Prairie dogs are an important component of prairie ecosystems. They are a prey species for rare animals such as black-footed ferrets, swift foxes, and ferruginous hawks and create habitat for rare birds such as mountain plovers.

While the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently decided that black-tailed prairie dogs do not warrant listing as a threatened species, a good part of their rationale was that during the past few years some States have made substantial progress in initiating management efforts to conserve prairie dogs.

For Montana to now abandon its efforts to manage prairie dogs would jeopardize the progress we have made in the past few years. Again, I would like to thank you for your consideration today and I encourage you to vote against HB 286.