



## Inspection Report

City of El Paso  
4001 E. Paisano Drive  
El Paso, TX 79905

Customer ID: **3888**  
Certificate: **74-C-0052**  
Site: 001  
City of El Paso

Type: FOCUSED INSPECTION  
Date: 18-DEC-2023

### 2.40(b)(3) Critical

#### Attending veterinarian and adequate veterinary care (dealers and exhibitors).

On 8/23/2023, the facility introduced a colony of 12, approximately five-month-old black-tailed prairie dogs into a habitat previously occupied by another prairie dog colony that disappeared suddenly, as detailed elsewhere in this report. A veterinary record entry dated 9/15/2023 states, "Keepers have not identified prairie dogs since put on habitat." The supervisor of the Chihuahuan desert exhibit areas confirmed that the prairie dogs were not visualized anywhere in the enclosure after the day they were introduced, and that fresh food placed daily at the entrances of the tunnels remained uneaten from that day forward. On 8/27/2023, staff removed pods from the mesquite trees inside the enclosure to ensure they were not being eaten instead of the regular diet, but the prairie dogs still remained unseen and did not take the regular diet offered. The supervisor's calendar corroborates additional details from her statement and email communications from the attending veterinarian: On 8/31/2023, the facility set up a motion-activated camera to watch for off-hour activity without success. On 9/15/2023, the facility rented a pipe camera to explore the exhibit tunnels, but this could not allow visualization of full tunnel lengths or around corners, and the facility began excavation of the entire exhibit, section-by-section. On 11/27/2023, three animals out of the colony of 12 were found alive but in very poor condition underground in the exhibit, more than three months after any of them were last sighted. One of the surviving animals died the following day. All other members of the colony were found deceased in underground passages or encased in soil prior to this date.

The licensee failed to obtain actual observations of these animals during the two-week period between 8/23/2023 and 9/15/2023 and delayed excavation to search areas that could not be seen. More animals might have been found alive if the facility did not delay more intensive measures to actually locate and observe them. The licensee must ensure that actual, daily observations of animals are made in order to assess their health and well-being, and to facilitate the communication of timely and accurate information on any problems of animal health, behavior, and well-being to the attending veterinarian.

Corrected before the date of inspection on 12/18/2023

### 3.125(a) Critical Repeat

#### Facilities, general.

An exhibit used to house black-tailed prairie dogs failed to protect the animals from tunnel collapse, leading to mass disappearances and deaths of the animals. During March 2022, the facility became aware that the entire colony of 14 adult black-tailed prairie dogs was missing. According to zoo staff, camera surveillance and excavation of the exhibit

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perimeter and most of the tunnels did not reveal definitive evidence of predation, a route of escape or any carcasses. The facility assumed predation to be the cause of the animal disappearances. Staff reinforced dig barriers, refilled the exhibit with the original soil and enclosed the open top of the exhibit with a mesh to prevent predator access. The facility obtained a second colony of 12, three-month-old black-tailed prairie dogs on 6/17/2023 and introduced them to the previous prairie dog exhibit on 8/23/2023, after a quarantine period. A veterinary record entry dated 9/15/2023 states, "Keepers have not identified prairie dogs since put on habitat." Zoo staff initiated excavation of the exhibit two weeks following the disappearance and began finding the carcasses of prairie dogs from the original colony as well as the newly introduced colony on 11/3/2023. Zoo staff took photographs of some of the carcasses as they were found, using microchip scanners to identify individual animals in the some of the photographs. Deceased animals identified in the photographs had microchip ID numbers 202468, 202469, 202470, 202471. The Chihuahuan desert exhibits supervisor participated in the excavation and identification, and stated to the inspector that tunnel collapse appeared likely in many places where the dead animals were found. Veterinary records on 11/3/2023 indicate that Prairie dog ID #202469 was the first carcass recovered from the new colony, and that it was "...found under a concrete portion of the habitat and presumed tunnel collapse is cause of death." On 11/27/2023, three prairie dogs identified by microchip as being members of the new colony (ID numbers 202474, 202477, 202478) were found alive and were immediately taken to the on-site veterinary hospital. Veterinary records state the animals were responsive and defensive, but emaciated, with hair loss and flaky to crusty skin. Despite prompt supportive care, one of the three survivors (ID #202474) died the following day. A gross necropsy was performed on site and samples were collected and submitted for histopathology. Results indicated the cause of death was attributed to blood clots in the vasculature resulting from a systemic infection caused by severe bacterial bronchopneumonia. Additional comments in the histology report support a recent and prolonged period of the animal not eating. As of the date of inspection, the remains of 9 out of 12 of the animals in the newer colony were excavated and identified by microchip implants; the carcasses of 10 out of the 14 original colony were found, though only one of that group was positively identified by microchip (ID #202106). The facility plans to continue indoor-only housing for the two animals recovering under veterinary care until they can be relocated to another facility. Habitats for animals with natural burrowing behaviors must be designed and constructed to prevent issues such as tunnel and den collapse, which hinders or prevents daily observations that are important for detecting health and welfare problems. Such collapses can even lead directly to entrapment and subsequent death by injury, illness, drowning, suffocation or starvation if animals are unable to return to the surface for food and water. The licensee must ensure that all animal enclosures are suitable to support the natural behaviors and activities of the animals they house; facilities must be constructed of such material and of such strength as appropriate for the animals involved and maintained in good repair to protect the animals from injury and contain them.

This inspection and exit interview were conducted with facility representatives.

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**Species Inspected**

| Cust No | Cert No   | Site | Site Name       | Inspection  |
|---------|-----------|------|-----------------|-------------|
| 3888    | 74-C-0052 | 001  | City of El Paso | 18-DEC-2023 |

| Count  | Scientific Name             | Common Name              |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 000002 | <i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i> | BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG |
| 000002 | <b>Total</b>                |                          |