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POCKET GOPHER CONTROL TECHNIQUES

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POCKET GOPHER CONTROL TECHNIQUES

The pocket gopher is a burrowing rodent with broad distribution in Montana. Many people believe these animals are moles, which leads to much confusion when recommending control measures. There are no moles in Montana.

Pocket gophers are very solitary animals. There is only one pocket gopher per burrow system, except during a very short breeding season sometime during late winter or spring, and when the female is nursing the young.

The young are born between February and June. There are four to seven young per litter.

Unlike ground squirrels, pocket gophers remain active all winter. Digging activity is reduced during the cold months, however, and they must live primarily on plant matter collected and cached during the warmer months. Burrowing activity is greatest during the spring and fall when soil moisture conditions are highest, with a drop in activity occurring during the hot summer months. The mid-summer drop in activity may not be seen in areas of high soil moisture, such as irrigated land.

Pocket gopher damage can be recognized by the nature of the earth mounds they make. The mounds are generally in clusters and rarely is there an open hole among them, since the pocket gopher keeps plugs of earth in the entrances to his burrow system. Ground squirrel and prairie dog burrows, on the other hand, are open at the surface.

Pocket gophers are rarely seen above ground. They feed on underground roots and bulbs. Occasionally they will eat the grasses and forbs that grow within a few inches of their burrow. The mounds they build cover vegetation and are a hazard to mowing operations in hayfields.

Studies indicate that moderate populations of pocket gophers remove about 20 percent of available herbage. Their burrows also disrupt irrigation and accelerate erosion in some areas.

Trapping is one method of pocket gopher control. Traps are of two basic designs: all metal with pointed wire pincers, and wooden with wire pincers. If your local hardware store, garden supply store or Extension office does not stock them, they can order them. Haphazard sets will take some pocket gophers, but the following method will consistently yield the best results:

Locate a main burrow runway by probing between mounds of earth made by the pocket gopher (Figure 1). A probe can be made by sharpening the end of a 3/8" or 1/2" rod to a point. Setting a trap in the hole found at the earth mound is not recommended, as these mounds are not visited frequently. Dig a hole about one foot in diameter down to the burrow. Find where the burrow enters and exits your excavation. Set two traps, one in each direction facing outwards. You may need to enlarge the burrow with a hand trowel to get the traps in. It is a good idea to attach a light chain or wire to each of the traps and fix it to a painted stake to aid in finding the set. Place a board over the hole you dug. Do not fill it in. Sift dirt around the edges of the board to keep the light out. Make one or two such sets in each burrow system. Since pocket gophers are very active, you should catch them in 24 hours in properly placed traps.

Hand baiting of pocket gophers is also an effective means of control (Figure 2). Locate a main burrow runway with a probe. Make the hole about 1/2 inch in diameter by twisting the probe or by using the larger end to enlarge the hole. Place a small funnel in this hole and drop the proper amount of bait (consult label directions to determine

this) down the hole. Remove the funnel and carefully place a clod of earth over the hole to keep light out. Do not put loose dirt in the hole, as it covers up the bait. Bait each burrow system in two or three places.

Pocket gopher burrow-building machines are useful for controlling infestations that cover large acreages (Figure 3). These machines meter out grain bait in artificial burrows when pulled behind tractors. Pocket gophers find these tunnels and consume the bait. There are several designs and manufacturers of these machines.

If you have any questions regarding pocket gopher control, contact your County Extension Agent or your area Department of Livestock Vertebrate Pest Control Biologist. Your area biologists are:

Eastern Montana - Craig Swick (Sidney) - 482-2962

Central Montana - Gary Nesse (Lewistown) - 538-8488

Western Montana - Ray Record (Missoula) - 728-0740

Figure 1.

TRAPPING POCKET GOPHERS

1) Use probe to locate main burrow.

2) Dig down to the main burrow and place traps as shown. Attach a light wire to each of the traps and secure to a stake. Cover hole with board to exclude light.

Figure 2.

HAND BAITING OF POCKET GOPHERS

1) Use probe to locate main burrow. Twist probe to enlarge hole slightly.

2) Place funnel in hole. Pour measured amount of grain down hole.

3) Place clod or sod over hole to exclude light. Do not use loose dirt as it covers the bait.

Figure 3.

POCKET GOPHER BURROW BUILDER

The pocket gopher burrow builder meters out grain bait into an artificial underground burrow constructed by the machine. Pocket gophers enter the artificial burrow where it intersects their natural burrow system and find the bait.

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