

Fish and Wildlife Service**Record of Decision; Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction Conata Basin/Badlands, SD**

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service.
ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: Pursuant to regulations promulgated by the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1505.2) and the implementing procedures of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (40 U.S.C. 1501 et seq.), the Department of Interior has prepared this record of decision on the *Final Environmental Impact Statement, Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction, Conata Basin/Badlands, South Dakota*. The record of decision is a concise statement of what decisions were made, what alternatives were considered, and acceptable mitigation measures developed in order to avoid or minimize environmental impacts.

This reintroduction effort is an interagency program involving the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and the Forest Service. Each Agency has the responsibility under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, to recover threatened and endangered species. Each Agency will prepare a separate record of decision to cover its respective responsibilities under the reintroduction program.

The Selected Alternative

The preferred alternative, Alternative C, releases black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*) as a nonessential experimental population into a reintroduction area of approximately 42,000 acres (16,997 ha) on the Badlands National Park (BNP) and the Buffalo Gap National Grassland (BGNG). The initial reintroductions will occur on the BNP. This area contains approximately 8,000 acres (3,238 ha) of black-tailed prairie dog colonies. A nonessential experimental population area of approximately 1,182,200 acres is delineated within which the legal status of the black-footed ferret is changed from endangered to nonessential experimental to allow for greater management flexibility. All of the proposed reintroduction area is public land administered by either the National Park Service or the Forest Service.

The purpose of the proposed action is to use experimental techniques to reintroduce and establish a free ranging, cooperatively managed wild population of black-footed ferrets in the Conata Basin/Badlands experimental population area near Wall, South Dakota. The released black-footed ferrets

and their progeny will be classified as a nonessential experimental population under Federal rulemaking requirements.

Other Alternatives Considered

Five alternatives, including the preferred alternative, were analyzed in the final environmental impact statement. All action alternatives propose to reintroduce black-footed ferrets as a nonessential experimental population. The alternatives included:

Alternative A—Black-footed ferrets would not be reintroduced into BNP or BGNG (No Action).

Alternative B—Black-footed ferrets would be released only in BNP in a reintroduction area of approximately 25,000 acres which contains about 3,200 acres of prairie dog colonies.

Alternative D—Reintroduce black-footed ferrets into a 42,000 acre reintroduction area on BNP and BGNG with initial releases in BGNG. The reintroduction area is similar to that of Alternative C and contains approximately 8,000 acres of prairie dog colonies.

Alternative E—Release black-footed ferrets into a 172,000 acre reintroduction area on BNP and BGNG consisting of the entire north unit of the BNP and the BGNG in the Conata Basin. No priority release site is identified in this alternative. The initial black-footed ferret releases would occur in the most biologically suitable habitat within the reintroduction area.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The Fish and Wildlife Service consider Alternative E to be the most environmentally preferred alternative. The levels of active prairie dog habitat would not increase over Alternatives C and D. Alternative E provides the least potential risks to the black-footed ferret due to expanded protection measures through the expansion of off-road travel and trapping restriction and possible long-term shooting restrictions to an expanded reintroduction area.

Alternative C was selected because it prescribes a reintroduction program that is more compatible with the existing recreational and agricultural land uses in the area thereby garnishing additional support. It is the Fish and Wildlife Service's assessment that the benefits of additional support outweigh the possible benefits of extending land use restrictions associated with the expanded reintroduction area of Alternative E.

Minimization of Impacts

Public concerns, potential impacts, and methods to mitigate those impacts are addressed in the final environmental

impact statement. The Fish and Wildlife Service considers that all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from implementation of the preferred plan have been identified and are considered acceptable.

Decision

The Fish and Wildlife Service will accept the proposed action to release captive reared black-footed ferrets into the Conata Basin/Badlands area near Wall, South Dakota as described in Alternative C in the *Final Environmental Impact Statement, Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction, Conata Basin/Badlands, South Dakota*.

After careful evaluation of each alternative and considering the issues of public response; legislative intent; management objectives; and cost, socioeconomic, and environmental effects, the Fish and Wildlife Service believes that the proposed action represents the most balanced course of action for the future management of the black-footed ferret.

Dated: June 21, 1994.

Robert D. Jacobsen,

Acting Regional Director, Mountain Prairie States Region.

[FR Doc. 94-15478 Filed 6-24-94; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4310-36-M