

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE  
REINTRODUCTION OF BLACK-FOOTED FERRETS  
IN SOUTH-CENTRAL SOUTH DAKOTA**

**The Fish and Wildlife Service has been reintroducing black-footed ferrets in various locations since 1991. Hasn't this species recovered yet?**

To date, we have had eight reintroductions in Wyoming, Montana (2 separate sites), South Dakota (2 separate sites), Arizona, the Utah/Colorado border and Mexico. There are approximately 300 black-footed ferrets in the wild, and reproduction has occurred in at least three states. One reintroduction site in South Dakota has at least 200 ferrets and appears to be the first established, self-sustaining wild population since Meeteetse, Wyoming (the last known wild population). However, the black-footed ferret is far from being recovered in the wild.

**What does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recovery plan say is needed for the black-footed ferret?**

The recovery plan establishes a national recovery objective to ensure survival of ferrets by (a) increasing the captive population of ferrets to 200 breeding adults by 1991 (which has been achieved); (b) establishing a prebreeding population of 1,500 free-ranging breeding adults in 10 or more different populations, with no fewer than 30 breeding adults in each population by the year 2010 (which is yet to be achieved); and (c) encouraging the widest possible distribution of reintroduced animals throughout their historical range (which is yet to be achieved). We can reclassify the black-footed ferret to threatened status when we meet these objectives.

**Where will the black-footed ferrets be reintroduced if this special rule is approved? Where are the other reintroduced populations in South Dakota?**

At least 20 ferrets (and likely many more) will be reintroduced annually for up to five years in prairie dog complexes in Todd County on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in south-central South Dakota. These black-tailed prairie dog complexes contain over 15,000 acres of prairie dogs within two proposed ferret reintroduction areas. The first actual release of ferrets will occur on a primary reintroduction site known as the Lower Cut Meat Complex on tribal trust lands.

Black-footed ferrets were also reintroduced into the Conata Basin/Badlands area of southwestern South Dakota in 1994-1999. In 2000, ferrets were released on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation and those releases are continuing. The Conata Basin/Badlands reintroduction effort is the most successful to date and may support a self-sustaining population of ferrets.

**If black-footed ferrets are being raised in captivity and are reproducing in the wild, why not plan on doing this for all endangered species? We can "produce and place" species when needed.**

Severe reductions in the availability of the ferret's principal prey, in combination with other factors such as secondary poisoning from prairie dog toxicants, resulted in the near extinction of the black-footed ferret in the wild by 1980. We believed the species to be extinct; however, in 1981 a small population of ferrets was discovered near Meeteetse, Wyoming. In 1985-1986, an outbreak of sylvatic plague and canine distemper threatened the population. To save the species from extinction, the remaining individuals were taken into captivity by 1987 and were used as founders for a captive propagation program. Previous captive breeding attempts on a few remaining black-footed ferrets from South Dakota in the 1970s had failed and the prospects of recovering a species from such a small captive population were questionable. More recently, with the combined expertise and extensive efforts of biologists and captive propagation specialists across the country, the captive breeding program has exceeded expectations and ferrets have been successfully reintroduced into the wild at several locations within their historical range. Still, full recovery of the species has a long way to go and hinges on the continued success of the captive breeding program and development of suitable reintroduction areas. Today, the captive population of juvenile and adult ferrets fluctuates annually between 300 and 600 animals depending on the time of year and on annual reproductive success and mortality.

Captive breeding as a recovery method is typically both very expensive and risky for the species. Often, by the time a species is reduced to captivity, the number of remaining individuals is so low that inbreeding becomes a major concern. In addition, captive populations are vulnerable to catastrophic loss from disease and other disasters. Finally, captive-bred animals often lose the skills they need to survive in the wild. Because of the many inherent problems that accompany captive rearing of endangered species, the Service regards captive breeding as a last resort to save a species and focuses primarily on conserving the species and its habitats before such critically low population levels are reached.

**Have these captive bred ferrets ever lived with prairie dogs in the wild?  
How will they know what to do?**

All captive-raised ferrets will undergo preconditioning exposure in open-air pens. During this time they are exposed to live prairie dogs, burrows, and other natural stimuli. Ferrets provided with this experience survive in the wild at significantly greater rates than non-preconditioned ferrets.

**Will this release of black-footed ferrets impact landowners in the area or any State or Federal agencies?**

No. The nonessential experimental population designation and accompanying special rule provide greater regulatory flexibility in managing endangered species in a manner that will not conflict with existing human activities or hinder public uses of the area. Under this designation and special rule, neither the activities of private landowners, or other State or Federal agencies will be impacted by the presence of black-footed ferrets on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. Also, in the event that a black-footed ferret should leave the nonessential experimental area, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and/or cooperators will move the ferret back to the experimental population area where the primary population of ferrets is supported, if requested by the landowner or necessary for the protection of the ferret.

**How will you know if these ferrets live and reproduce in the wild?**

Biologists with the Tribe and other agency partners will monitor these released animals in several different ways during the year. They will conduct spotlight surveys at night (black-footed ferrets are active at night), and snow track surveys will be conducted in the winter. Spotlight surveys will be conducted next summer to check for kits (young ferrets) and will give a good indication of the success of this reintroduction.

**Are there any known viable wild populations of ferrets outside of established reintroduction areas?**

Despite years of intensive searching by Federal and State land management agencies and Tribes, no ferrets originating from wild stock have been documented since the last wild ferret was trapped near Meeteetse, Wyoming, in 1987. Ferrets are known to exist in the wild only in areas where reintroduction efforts have occurred.