

# Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Plan Review

*Washington, DC  
22 - 24 July 1992*



## **Executive Summary**

The Workshop was convened by the IUCN\SSC CBSG at the request of the USFWS to review the current status of the recovery program for the black-footed ferret and to make recommendations for updating the Recovery Plan for the species. It was requested that specific consideration be given to the technical issues of metapopulation population strategies for recovery, disease ecology, and genetic management of the wild populations. A group of people expert in various parts of the black-footed ferret program participated in the Workshop and identified topics that need attention to achieve recovery of the black-footed ferret in free-ranging populations. Working groups outlined the status of our available information and immediate needs for continuation of the recovery program. The reports of the working groups were discussed in depth by the entire group so that the final report represents a consensus of the participants.

The major topic areas considered by working groups included reintroduction site selection, prairie dog population biology, prairie dog control, reintroduction techniques, disease ecology, population biology characteristics of the captive population, population modelling, reproductive biology, public opinion, and cost analysis. The Working Group Reports constitutes the body of this report.

The working group reports and the discussions identified several areas that we believe need intensive and in depth analysis and more detailed reports to provide an adequate basis for revision of the Recovery Plan. These groups will need to include additional experts in the respective topic areas. We can make suggestions for people to be included. A more general meeting with people from all of the special topic expert groups and people who participated in the present Workshop might be convened in 6-12 months to integrate the information in these reports from these groups to assist in preparation of a revised recovery plan.

The decline in available prairie dog habitat, the difficulty in identifying suitable release sites, and the need to address the traditions of prairie dog control clearly emerged as the primary problems facing recovery of the black-footed ferret in free ranging populations. The fundamental biological problems of propagation and release of captive-bred animals are resolved.

## **Recommended Expert Group Topics**

1. **Disease Ecology** to include epidemiology of disease affecting black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs, disease management in the captive and release programs, role of disease in translocations, and estimates of frequency and severity of disease events in terms of their effects on individual population's risk of extinction. An important workshop on Disease Ecology in Captive Breeding and Reintroduction Programs

(organized by the CBSG, AAZPA, and AAZV) is scheduled for 11-13 November 1992 that can provide some of the information needed. A report formulating some of the problems is attached to this report as an appendix.

2. **Population Modelling** to integrate the available information and information developed by the other expert groups into a series of metapopulation management scenarios for evaluating risks of extinction of individual populations as a guide to development of management strategies, for continued development of the release program, for maintenance of the free ranging populations, and for suggesting methods for achievement of recovery goals.
3. Develop a systematic program of **Public Opinion Evaluation** and public information programs. Use external experts in crisis management to guide the wildlife specialists in the process of developing public acceptance and involvement in the release program in each state.
4. **Release Site** identification, availability and selection. We recommend that the ICC be provided the report from this workshop and be prepared to provide site locations in each state.
5. **Prairie Dog** population biology including demography, genetics, and response to catastrophic events such as disease. Models for both white tailed and black tailed prairie dogs need to be developed and integrated with the black footed ferret models to provide better risk estimates of extinction.
6. **Fund Raising** from federal, state, and private sources are fundamental issues that need to be addressed to implement the program. Cost estimation and budget priorities are an essential part of this process. Note that the prairie dog surveys needed for site selection are a costly block to the site selection process. A funding commitment is necessary.

### **Reintroduction Site Selection and Availability**

1. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) must recognize that the prairie dog ecosystem in the Western U.S. is declining at a very rapid pace and black-footed ferret recovery sites are not being identified and prepared rapidly enough to keep pace with captive breeding program capabilities. All mechanisms available to the Service must be utilized to accelerate this site identification process.
2. Contact existing state working groups and draw circles around good complexes, large or small, NOW. Do not overlook foreign country opportunities (Canada and Mexico).
3. Identify areas that are presently small or fragmented but have future potential and include these also.
4. Consider reducing the required level of specific analysis of habitat suitability (prairie dog transects) after sites are identified - particularly in black-tailed prairie dogs - to accelerate the process. If a site is selected for release, the data must be collected. The following factors influence site selection:
  - a. Number and size of prairie dog colonies.
  - b. Estimated prairie dog numbers.
  - c. Predator density.

- d. Presence of distemper or plague epizootic.
  - e. Percent of total complex area occupied by prairie dogs.
  - f. Socio-political factors.
5. Prepare a Regional map of sites identified and consider preparing a programmatic Environmental Impact Statement to accelerate the Rule Making Process.
  6. Make it very clear in the Regional Plan that smaller sites are not optimum but are an integral part of overall metapopulation management.
  7. Use results of Vortex model or others to determine the minimum size of prairie dog complex so time is not wasted on locations where the habitat will not support a viable ferret population, unless they have rehabilitation potential.
  8. Look at Regional Map to maximize opportunities for future linkage of systems.
  9. Ferrets need to be established in the wild to start affecting public opinions.
    - a. It really didn't cause local economy to collapse.
    - b. They really didn't stop grazing.
    - c. It didn't reduce my AUMs.
    - d. Local acceptability of Endangered Species Act didn't hurt us.
    - e. These little critters are kind of neat anyway!
  10. Utilize The Nature Conservancy or large ranches which may provide opportunities for ferret recovery. Notify State and Federal agencies that they should set aside sites suitable for ferret recovery.
  11. The FWS should dedicate sufficient staff to accomplish this task rather than identifying ferret recovery actions as an aside.
  12. Site selection needs acceleration; however, once selected for release it must be studied to maintain consistency of data on prairie dogs, disease, etc.

The FWS must notify all other Federal agencies that the prairie dog ecosystem is in jeopardy and needs a more concerted effort to avoid future Endangered Species listings - if not the Ecosystem itself:

1. Continue to use Section 7 and control actions that would reduce or eliminate areas above the acreage called for in VORTEX model results.
2. Encourage Federal agencies to consolidate areas to enlarge opportunities.
3. Encourage support for BIA appropriations for participation in Endangered Species Recovery on reservations, and specific prairie management plans on some reservations.

4. Encourage placement of Section 6 dollars on reservations to encourage Endangered Species Recovery actions.
5. Point out to all agencies the necessity of helping to identify and protect mapped areas, or else they could be identified as critical habitat, and then greater anxiety arises.
6. If other species get listed greater anxiety arises.

Begin to prepare management plans and Special Rules for small sites in the same priority as large - like they will be needed in 1993. They might be. This will allow a number of sites to be ready at the same time, so if a priority site is dropped because of disease, politics etc. a back-up site or two are ready to receive ferrets for reintroduction. If this accelerated approach is not taken, then a number of actions may occur.

1. The prairie dog ecosystem will continue to decline and an increased number of species end up on the Endangered Species list.
2. The captive breeding program will have to be down-phased to produce fewer ferret kits because reintroduction and therefore recovery is slowed.
3. The individual fights under Section 7 will continue.
4. The Service becomes more and more vulnerable to suits from outside because the Endangered Species Act is not being implemented.

Just because some smaller sites are being accepted, DO NOT GIVE UP ANY BIG SITES - they might ultimately be the entire foundation of the recovery program and cannot be further reduced.

Push for prairie dog management plans for each state and once in place, begin to block-clear other areas to decrease controversy over prairie dog ecosystem.

If all else fails, then the Service must say we will do an Experiment and we will release ferrets on National Refuges and Parks as fully-endangered species, and if they get onto private land we will come and get them.