

Black-Footed Ferret Survival Requires Public Support

The public plays a role in the survival of the endangered black-footed ferret.

By Angela Pham

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Photo courtesy of Marylou Zarbock

Public comments can impact the agencies overseeing the reintroduction of black-footed ferrets.

As one of North America's most endangered mammals, the black-footed ferret is a small animal that's been on the radar of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since it became endangered in 1967. Now, everyday U.S. citizens are taking note of the rare species. Public notice is helping make a difference in the ferrets' population numbers, which are only about 1,000 today.

Black-footed ferrets can't exist without prairie dogs, which are its main food source and make burrows that the black-footed ferrets take over as a home. Poisoning and plague, however, threaten the prairie dog populations across the Great Plains and prairies of North America.

Scott Larson, a fish and wildlife biologist in South Dakota who works with ferret reintroduction sites across North America, said that poisons used to control the number of prairie dogs, which are considered pests by some ranchers, can be deadly to a colony of black-footed ferrets.

"Poisons can kill ferrets if they eat a prairie dog that's been poisoned," Larson said.

States make a conscious effort to protect the black-footed ferrets. In South Dakota, Larson said a site is surveyed for the presence of black-footed ferrets. If they are found, the black-footed ferrets are transported to another location prior to the use of any toxins on prairie dogs.

Non-native diseases have also played a role in the decimation of black-footed ferret populations. The plague is a formidable nemesis of both black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs, Larson said, though much research still needs to be done about it. Plague can infect either species directly or be passed on to a black-footed ferret if it eats a plague-infected prairie dog. Even a flea bite can pass along the disease.

Yet the public isn't helpless on this issue. Although 18 black-footed ferret reintroduction sites currently exist, Larson said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service group is continually looking for new sites to develop. When there is interest in developing a new introduction site, the public can turn out to voice support, Larson said.

"[The public] can also contact public land managers to see if there's interest in sites for ferret recovery, and we're still doing a lot of research on the plague," Larson said. "We always need to have the research supported by the public."

Federal land bases, like those owned by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, often offer public comment opportunities when a new site is being considered. Conservation of both black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs is important, as prairie dogs are vital to the existence of the ferrets, Larson said.

It really does make a difference to have the public voice concern over these issues, Larson said.

In South Dakota, Larson said federal land agencies recently received thousands of comments encouraging the conservation of prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets, and their concerns were duly acknowledged.

"I think [the public comments] have made an impact on the agencies," he said.