

Will Black-Footed Ferrets In South Dakota Survive Plague?

One of the largest populations of endangered black-footed ferrets is being threatened by sylvatic plague.

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Courtesy of Marylou Zarbock

Black-footed ferrets were on the verge of extinction, but plague is now threatening the population of one of the most successful re-introduction sites of this North American mammal. In May of this year, the presence of sylvatic plague was confirmed in the Conata Basin in South Dakota, an area that previously offered a relatively safe haven for a growing population of endangered black-footed ferrets. Conata Basin is one of the most successful re-introduction sites for black-footed ferrets and home to many prairie dogs, the staple diet of black-footed ferrets. Plague is fatal to both species.

As of June 5, biologist Travis Livieri reported that approximately 4,000 acres of the 30,000 total acres of prairie dogs were affected. "It will likely spread further," he said. Livieri is executive director of Prairie Wildlife Research, an organization at the forefront of efforts to save black-footed ferrets.

"Several federal agencies and organizations have begun the battle against plague," Livieri said. "The federal agencies are focused upon killing fleas, a known vector of plague, by spraying dust into prairie dog burrows" Livieri is working in the field with the National Wildlife Health Center and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to vaccinate the ferrets against plague, a process he said requires them to spotlight, capture and inject each ferret two times at least two weeks apart.

"The combination of dusting and vaccine is very effective in halting plague, if it can be accomplished quickly enough," Livieri said.

In this race against time, recent weather conditions are causing problems.

"We've received quite a bit of rainfall in South Dakota, making it nearly impossible to accomplish field work," Livieri said. "Even a little bit of rain turns the soil into gumbo, and you're instantly stuck. We've spent five nights so far slogging around in the mud to capture and vaccinate ferrets. Moist, humid conditions can also promote the flea population and further the spread of plague."

Despite the challenges, Livieri believes a viable population of black-footed ferrets will survive.

But if any survive, the battle can't wait — and a lack of adequate funding is another issue hindering efforts. Livieri said support is needed now.

"The battle against plague will be ongoing but the first steps — vaccinating and dusting — are the largest," Livieri said.

People who wish to help can do so by "adopting" a black-footed ferret, as explained on the Prairie Wildlife Research website. Livieri said it's the easiest, most effective way to help black-footed ferrets.

Black-footed ferrets are native to North America and were thought to be on the verge of extinction by the 1970s, but in the early 1980s a small population was found in Wyoming and biologists have been working to save the species since then.