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## BLACK-FOOTED FERRET RESTORATION; HISTORY, CHALLENGES AND CURRENT STATUS

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Black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*) were once found throughout the West on prairie dog (*Cynomys* spp.) colonies ranging from Canada to Mexico. Ferrets are totally dependent on prairie dogs as prey and for habitat, living exclusively in the burrow and tunnel systems created and maintained by prairie dogs. Cultivation of the Great Plains for crop production and prairie dog eradication efforts in support of domestic livestock production during the 20th century reduced black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) by some 98% of their former extent and black-footed ferrets were thought extinct by the late 1970's. The surprise finding of a remnant population near Meeteetse Wyoming in 1981 gave new hope for survival of the species. However, devastating diseases resulted in a heroic rescue effort of remaining survivors and the beginnings of an intensive captive breeding effort. All black-footed ferrets in existence today are descendants of 7 founders from that effort. More than 8,500 ferrets have been born in captivity since 1985. The first reintroduction of black-footed ferrets back into the wild was in Shirley Basin, Wyoming in 1991. The first reintroduction in Montana was in 1994 on the UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge in north-central Montana. Notably, wolf reintroduction began 3 months after the first ferrets were released in Montana when wolves were placed in soft-release pens in Yellowstone National Park. More than 4,500 captive-reared black-footed ferrets have been released at 27 reintroduction sites since 1991. A total of about 300 black-footed ferrets were estimated alive in the wild at the end of 2015. Ferrets have been released at 5 sites in Montana; 3 on Indian Reservations (Fort Belknap, Northern Cheyenne and Crow), 1 on the UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge and 1 on Bureau of Land Management lands that are part of The Nature Conservancy's Matador Ranch. There are numerous challenges to recovery of this critically endangered species. Understanding and attempting to manage sylvatic plague, an exotic disease introduced to North America in the early 1900's, is foremost on the research front and a formidable biological challenge. There are both promising and challenging aspects to plague management. Social tolerance of prairie dogs on the landscape by agricultural interests and some natural resource managers is also a significant obstacle to black-footed ferret recovery. Opportunities are available to develop locales capable of supporting ferret populations if the right synergies of social and biological interactions can be fostered. Despite highly varied and emotional viewpoints, along with intense controversy, Montanan's have found room for wolves as native fauna and they now occupy more than one-third of the state. Hopefully, Montanan's can also find room for a few thousand acres of prairie dogs in multiple places that can each support viable ferret populations. Recovering an endangered species that was once thought extinct, and one that is truly indicative of prairie ecosystem function and health, would be an accomplishment. However, continuing investment in recovery of this species in the wild has been, understandably, criticized. Until recovery of black-footed ferrets is no longer deemed a worthy pursuit, efforts to provide a landscape that could support prairie dogs, ferrets and other native wildlife that were once widespread across the Great Plains will continue.