

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET RECOVERY IN MONTANA—WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?^{TWS}

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Black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) reintroductions to Montana began in 1994 on the UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge in southern Phillips County. Reintroductions continued each fall through 1999 and a total of 187 ferrets were released. At least 188 wild-born kits were observed from 1995 to 2002. The number of wild-born kits observed each fall increased steadily from 1995-2000. Habitat, i.e. extent and density of black-tailed prairie dog colonies, was presumed to be limiting population growth beyond the 20-30 breeding adults observed each spring from 1996 to 2001. The UL Bend ferret population began a

dramatic decline during summer 2001, and by November 2002, only four remained (3 males, 1 female). A total of 180 ferrets were released on the Fort Belknap Reservation from 1997 to 2000. At least eight kits were produced in the wild from 1998 to 2002. Spring surveys at Fort Belknap located 6 breeding adults each year and only a single male was observed during 2002. No ferrets are currently known alive at Fort Belknap. Forty-five ferrets have been released on USDI Bureau of Land Management lands, midway between UL Bend and Fort Belknap from 2001-2002. Two wild-born kits were observed and fall 2002 surveys found seven ferrets (5 male, 2 female). More than 600 ferrets have been input into Montana over the last 9 years. Today's total population numbers < 10. Causes for these declines, some manageable and others not, are discussed. Management plans for black-tailed prairie dogs are currently being developed and will likely determine if black-footed ferrets can exist in Montana.