

may be directly translocated to the reintroduction site.

2. *Biological*: The black-footed ferret is a member of the Mustelid or weasel family; has a black facemask, black legs, and a black-tipped tail; is nearly 60 centimeters (2 feet) in length; and weighs up to 1.1 kilograms (2.5 pounds). It is the only ferret species native to North America. The historical range of the species, based on specimen collections, extends over 12 western States (Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming) and the Canadian Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Prehistoric evidence indicates that ferrets once occurred from the Yukon Territory in Canada to Mexico and Texas (Anderson *et al.*, 1986).

Black-footed ferrets depend almost exclusively on prairie dog colonies for food, shelter, and denning (Henderson *et al.*, 1969, updated 1974; Forrest *et al.*, 1985). The range of the ferret coincides with that of prairie dogs (Anderson *et al.*, 1986), and ferrets with young have been documented only in the vicinity of active prairie dog colonies. Historically, black-footed ferrets have been reported in association with black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), white-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys leucurus*), and Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) towns (Anderson *et al.*, 1986).

Significant reductions in both prairie dog numbers and distribution occurred during the last century due to widespread poisoning of prairie dogs, the conversion of native prairie to farmland, and outbreaks of sylvatic plague, particularly in the southern portions of the ranges of several species of prairie dog in North America. Sylvatic plague arrived from Asia in approximately 1900 (Eskey and Haas, 1940). It is an exotic disease foreign to the evolutionary history of prairie dogs, which have little or no immunity to it. Black-footed ferrets also are highly susceptible to sylvatic plague (Williams *et al.*, 1991 and Williams *et al.*, 1994). This severe reduction in the availability of their principal prey species, in combination with other factors such as secondary poisoning from toxicants ingested by prairie dogs, resulted in the near extinction of the black-footed ferret in the wild by the early 1970s (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1988).

In 1974, a remnant wild population of ferrets in South Dakota, originally discovered in 1964, abruptly disappeared (Henderson *et al.*, 1969, updated 1974). As a result, we believed the species to be extinct. However, in 1981, a small population was

discovered near Meeteetse, Wyoming (Schroeder and Martin, 1982). In 1985–86, the Meeteetse population declined to only 18 animals due to an outbreak of sylvatic plague and canine distemper (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1988). Following this critical decline, the remaining individuals were taken into captivity in 1986–1987 to serve as founders for a captive propagation program. Since that time, captive-breeding efforts have been highly successful and have facilitated ferret reintroductions over a broad area of formerly occupied range. Today, the captive population of juveniles and adults annually fluctuates between 300 and 600 animals depending on time of year, yearly reproductive success, and annual mortalities. The captive ferret population is currently divided among six captive-breeding facilities throughout the United States and Canada, with a small number on display for educational purposes at several facilities. Also, 65 to 90 ferrets are located at several field-based captive-breeding sites in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, and New Mexico.

3. *Recovery Goals/Objectives*: The recovery plan for the black-footed ferret (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1988) contains the following recovery objectives for reclassification of the species from endangered to threatened:

(a) Increasing the captive population of ferrets to 200 breeding adults by 1991 (achieved);

(b) Establishing a prebreeding population of 1,500 free-ranging breeding adults in 10 or more different populations, with no fewer than 30 breeding adults in each population by the year 2010 (ongoing); and,

(c) Encouraging the widest possible distribution of reintroduced animals throughout their historical range (ongoing).

Although several reintroduction efforts have occurred throughout the ferret's range, populations may have become self-sustaining at only one site in South Dakota (Lockhart, Black-footed Ferret Coordinator, pers. comm. 2002).

We can reclassify the black-footed ferret from endangered to threatened status when the recovery objectives listed above have been achieved, assuming that the mortality rate of established populations remains at or below a rate at which new populations become established or increase. We have been successful in rearing black-footed ferrets in captivity, and, in 1997, we reached captive-breeding program objectives.

In 1988, we divided the single captive population into three subpopulations to avoid the possibility of a catastrophic

event (*e.g.*, contagious disease) eliminating the entire captive population. Additional breeding centers were added later, and presently there are six separate subpopulations in captivity. Current recovery efforts emphasize the reintroduction of animals back into the wild from the captive source stock. Surplus individuals produced in captivity are now available for use in reintroduction areas.

4. *Reintroduction Sites*: The Service, in cooperation with western State and Federal agencies, Tribal representatives, and conservation groups, evaluates potential black-footed ferret reintroduction sites and has previously initiated ferret reintroduction projects at several sites within the historical range of the black-footed ferret. The first reintroduction project occurred in Wyoming in 1991, and subsequent efforts have taken place in South Dakota and Montana in 1994, Arizona in 1996, a second effort in Montana in 1997, Colorado/Utah in 1999, a second site in South Dakota in 2000, and Mexico in 2001. The Service and the Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team (comprising 27 State and Federal agencies, Native American tribes, and conservation organizations) have identified the Rosebud Sioux Reservation (Reservation) as a high-priority black-footed ferret reintroduction site due to its extensive black-tailed prairie dog habitat and the absence of sylvatic plague (Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team, 2000).

In the early 1990s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (1995) estimated the acreage of prairie dog colonies on Rosebud Tribal Trust lands at 18,000 hectares (ha) (45,000 acres (ac)). In the mid-1990s, the Tribe evaluated a black-footed ferret reintroduction effort and completed some of the activities (*i.e.*, habitat evaluations) necessary to begin such reintroduction efforts. In 2001, the Tribe began additional activities to work toward ferret reintroduction and has worked with the Service to gather information necessary to establish an NEP designation for any ferret reintroductions that may occur.

(a.) *Rosebud Sioux Reservation Experimental Population*

*Reintroduction Area*: The area designated as the Rosebud Sioux Reservation Black-footed Ferret Experimental Population Area (Experimental Population Area) overlays all of Gregory, Mellette, Todd, and Tripp Counties in South Dakota. Any black-footed ferret found within these four counties will be considered part of an NEP. Within the Experimental Population Area, the primary