

reintroduction area will be in large black-tailed prairie dog complexes located in Todd County near the town of Parmelee. The Town of Rosebud is approximately 10-air miles away and is the location of the Rosebud Sioux Tribal offices. Rosebud is approximately 160 kilometers (100 miles) south of Pierre, the capital of South Dakota.

The Experimental Population Area supports at least two large complexes of black-tailed prairie dog colonies located within the four-county area. These counties encompass approximately 1,391,862 ha (3,437,900 ac). Approximately 26 percent or 356,411 ha (880,336 ac) of the Experimental Population Area is Tribal and Allotted Trust lands of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. The majority of this Tribal and Allotted Trust land is native rangeland used for grazing.

Approximately 70 percent of the land within the Experimental Population Area is owned by private landowners, although less than 20 percent of the land in the primary reintroduction area is privately owned. No ferrets will be released on private lands. Designating reintroduced ferrets as an NEP should minimize potential issues that may arise with a reintroduction in the vicinity of private lands. The Service, Tribe, and other cooperators agree that, if ferrets disperse onto private lands, program officials will capture and translocate the ferrets back to Tribal lands if requested by the landowner or if necessary for the protection of the ferrets. Any activity needing access to private lands will be conducted only with the permission of the landowner.

Black-footed ferret dispersal to and occupation of areas outside of the Experimental Population Area is unlikely to occur toward the east, north, and south due to the large size of the Experimental Population Area, the absence of suitable nearby habitat (*i.e.*, large contiguous prairie dog colonies), cropland barriers (*e.g.*, expansive cultivation over the eastern portion of the Experimental Population Area), and physical barriers (*e.g.*, the Missouri River to the east). Any expansion westerly from the reintroduction site will be handled by recapturing ferrets, upon request by a landowner, and bringing them into Experimental Population Area or handled through future cooperative efforts with the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The Tribe estimates a minimum of approximately 6,000 ha (15,000 ac) of black-tailed prairie dog colonies are potentially available to black-footed ferrets in a localized area in northwestern Todd County and could support over 150 ferret families (characterized as an adult

female, 3 kits, and one-half adult male; *i.e.*, 1 adult male for every 2 adult females) (Biggins *et al.*, 1993). Large, contiguous prairie dog colonies and the absence of physical barriers between prairie dog colonies in this portion of the Reservation (the primary ferret release area) should facilitate ferret distribution throughout this complex.

(b.) *Primary Reintroduction Area:* The primary reintroduction area within the Experimental Population Area will occur on prairie dog colonies near Parmelee, in northwestern Todd County. The last remaining population of ferrets in South Dakota was known to exist in this area and adjacent Mellette County until the early 1970s (Henderson *et al.*, 1969, updated 1974). This population was studied and monitored extensively until it disappeared from the wild by 1974 (Henderson *et al.*, 1969, updated 1974). During monitoring efforts of this ferret population in the 1960s, researchers located eight road-killed ferrets during their years of work (Hillman and Linder, 1973). No road-killed ferrets have been turned in or noted from that area since the population was believed extirpated in the early 1970s. There have been many ferret surveys conducted in this area in the 1980s and 1990s with no ferrets being located (Hanebury, 1988; Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1995). The Tribe conducted additional ferret surveys in 2002 and did not locate any ferrets (Lonewolf, Rosebud Game Fish and Parks, pers. comm. 2002).

Black-footed ferrets will be released only if biological conditions are suitable and meet the management framework developed by the Tribe, in cooperation with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Service, and landowners/land managers. The Service will reevaluate ferret reintroduction efforts in the Experimental Population Area should any of the following conditions occur:

- (i) Failure to maintain sufficient habitat on specific reintroduction areas to support at least 30 breeding adults after 5 years.
- (ii) Failure to maintain sufficient prairie dog habitat in the primary reintroduction area as available in 2002.
- (iii) A wild ferret population is found within the Experimental Population Area following the initial reintroduction and prior to the first breeding season. The only black-footed ferrets currently occurring in the wild result from reintroductions in Arizona, Colorado/Utah, Montana, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Mexico. Consequently, the discovery of a black-footed ferret population at the Experimental Population Area prior to the reintroduction would confirm the

presence of a new population and would prevent designation of an experimental population for the area.

(iv) Discovery in any animal on or near the reintroduction area 6 months prior to the scheduled release of an active case of canine distemper or any other disease contagious to black-footed ferrets that the cooperators believe may compromise the reintroduction.

(v) Fewer than 20 captive black-footed ferrets are available for the first release.

(vi) Funding is not available to implement the reintroduction phase of the project on the Reservation.

(vii) Land ownership changes significantly or cooperators withdraw from the project.

All the above conditions will be based on information routinely collected by us or the Tribe (*see* "Paperwork Reduction Act" under the REQUIRED DETERMINATIONS section).

5. *Reintroduction Procedures:* In conformance with standard black-footed ferret reintroduction protocol, no fewer than 20 captive-raised or wild-translocated black-footed ferrets will be released in the Experimental Population Area in the first year of the program, and 20 or more animals will be released annually for the next 2 to 4 years. We anticipate releasing 50 or more ferrets in the first year and believe a self-sustaining wild population could be established on the Reservation within 5 years. Released ferrets will be excess to the needs of the captive-breeding program and their use will not affect the genetic diversity of the captive ferret population (ferrets used for reintroduction efforts can be replaced through captive breeding). In the future, it may be necessary to interchange ferrets from established, reintroduced populations to enhance the genetic diversity of the population on the Experimental Population Area.

Recent studies (Biggins *et al.*, 1998; Vargas *et al.*, 1998) have documented the importance of outdoor "preconditioning" experience on captive-reared ferrets prior to release in the wild. Ferrets exposed to natural prairie dog burrows in outdoor pens and natural prey prior to release survive in the wild at significantly higher rates than do cage-reared, non-preconditioned ferrets. At a minimum, all captive-reared ferrets released within the Experimental Population Area will receive adequate pre-conditioning treatments at existing pen facilities in South Dakota or other western States. In addition, we may translocate wild-born ferrets (from other NEPs with self-sustaining populations of ferrets) to the Experimental Population Area.