

Management considerations of this reintroduction project include:

(a) *Monitoring*: Several monitoring efforts will occur during the first 5 years of the program. We will annually monitor prairie dog distribution and numbers, and the occurrence of sylvatic plague. Testing resident carnivores (e.g., coyotes) for canine distemper will begin prior to the first ferret release and continue each year. We will monitor released ferrets and their offspring annually using spotlight surveys, snowtracking, other visual survey techniques, and possibly radio-telemetry on some individuals. The surveys will incorporate methods to monitor breeding success and long-term survival rates.

Through public outreach programs, we will inform the public and other appropriate State and Federal agencies about the presence of ferrets in the Experimental Population Area and the handling of any sick or injured ferrets. To meet our responsibilities to treat the Tribe on a Government-to-Government basis, we will request that the Tribe inform Tribal members of the presence of ferrets on Reservation lands and the proper handling of any sick or injured ferrets that are found. The Tribe will serve as the primary point of contact to report any injured or dead ferrets. Reports of injured or dead ferrets also must be provided to the Service Field Supervisor (see **ADDRESSES** section). It is important that we determine the cause of death for any ferret carcass found. Therefore, we request that discovered ferret carcasses not be disturbed but reported as soon as possible to appropriate Tribal and Service offices.

(b) *Disease*: The presence of canine distemper in any mammal on or near the reintroduction site will cause us to reevaluate the reintroduction program. Prior to releasing ferrets, we will establish the presence or absence of canine distemper in the release area by collecting at least 20 coyotes (and possibly other carnivores). Sampled predators will be tested for canine distemper and other diseases.

We will attempt to limit the spread of distemper by discouraging people from bringing unvaccinated pets into core ferret release areas. Any dead mammal or any unusual behavior observed in animals found within the area should be reported to us (see **ADDRESSES** section). Efforts are under way to develop an effective canine distemper vaccine for black-footed ferrets. Routine sampling for sylvatic plague in prairie dog towns will take place before and during the reintroduction effort, and annually thereafter.

(c) *Genetics*: Ferrets selected for reintroduction are excess to the needs of the captive population. Experimental populations of ferrets are usually less genetically diverse than overall captive populations. Selecting and reestablishing breeding ferrets that compensate for any genetic biases in earlier releases may correct this disparity. The ultimate goal is to establish wild ferret populations with the maximum genetic diversity that is possible from the founder ferrets. The eventual interchange of ferrets between established populations found elsewhere in the western United States will ensure that genetic diversity is maintained to the extent possible.

(d) *Prairie Dog Management*: We will work with the Tribe, affected landowners, and other Federal and State agencies to resolve any management conflicts in order to maintain: (1) Sufficient prairie dog acreage and density to support no less than 30 adult black-footed ferrets; and (2) suitable prairie dog habitat on core release areas at or above 2002 survey levels.

(e) *Mortality*: We will only reintroduce ferrets that are surplus to the captive-breeding program. Predator control, prairie dog management, vaccination, ferret preconditioning, and improved release methods should reduce mortality. Public education will help reduce potential sources of human-caused mortality.

The Act defines "incidental take" as take that is incidental to, and not the purpose of, the carrying out of an otherwise lawful activity such as recreation, livestock grazing, and other activities that are in accordance with Federal, Tribal, State, and local laws and regulations. A person may take a ferret within the Experimental Population Area provided that the take is unintentional and was not due to negligent conduct. Such conduct will not constitute "knowing take", and we will not pursue legal action. However, when we have evidence of knowing (i.e., intentional) take of a ferret, we will refer matters to the appropriate authorities for prosecution. Any take of a black-footed ferret, whether incidental or not, must be reported to the local Service Field Supervisor (see **ADDRESSES** section) and should be reported to the Tribe as primary point of contact for this NEP. We expect levels of incidental take to be low since the reintroduction is compatible with existing land-use practices for the area.

Based on studies of wild black-footed ferrets at Meeteetse, Wyoming, and other places, black-footed ferrets can be killed by motor vehicles and dogs (Hillman and Linder, 1973; Schroeder

and Martin, 1982). We expect a rate of mortality similar to what was documented at Meeteetse, and, therefore, we estimate a human-related annual mortality rate of about 12 percent or less of all reintroduced ferrets and their offspring. If this level is exceeded in any given year, we will develop and implement measures to reduce the level of mortality.

(f) *Special Handling*: Service employees and authorized agents acting on their behalf may handle black-footed ferrets for scientific purposes; to relocate ferrets to avoid conflict with human activities; for recovery purposes; to relocate ferrets to other reintroduction sites; to aid sick, injured, and orphaned ferrets; and to salvage dead ferrets. We will return to captivity any ferret we determine to be unfit to remain in the wild. We also will determine the disposition of all sick, injured, orphaned, and dead ferrets.

(g) *Coordination with Landowners and Land Managers*: The Service and cooperators identified issues and concerns associated with this ferret reintroduction before the development of the proposed rule. The reintroduction also has been discussed with potentially affected State agencies and landowners within the release area. Affected Tribes, State agencies, landowners, and land managers have indicated support for the reintroduction if ferrets released in the Experimental Population Area are established as an NEP and if land use activities in the Experimental Population Area are not constrained without the consent of affected landowners.

(h) *Potential for Conflict with Grazing and Recreational Activities*: We do not expect conflicts between livestock grazing and ferret management. Grazing and prairie dog management on private lands within the Experimental Population Area will continue without additional restriction during implementation of the ferret recovery activities. With proper management, we do not expect adverse impacts to ferrets from hunting, prairie dog shooting, prairie dog control, and trapping of furbearers or predators in the Experimental Population Area. If proposed prairie dog shooting or control locally may affect the ferret's prey base within the primary release area, State, Tribal, and Federal biologists will determine whether ferrets could be impacted and, if necessary, take steps to avoid such impacts. However, because of the NEP designation, these steps will be voluntary measures since any recommendations by biologists will be advisory only. If private activities impede the establishment of ferrets, we