



DEPARTMENT OF
**NATURAL
RESOURCES**



**Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction Report
For Colorado Legislators as per HB00-1314
1/30/2002**

Prepared by the Colorado Division of Wildlife

The black-footed ferret is considered the rarest mammal in North America, one of the rarest in the world, and was one of the first species to be listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973. Under the ESA, federal agencies are authorized to acquire land, allocate funds, and to enter cooperative agreements with state authorities to recover species. A Black-footed Ferret Recovery Plan that set goals for the recovery of the species was completed in 1978, as mandated by the Act.

The black-footed ferret was close to extinction and at one point in time (the late 1970's and early 80's) was considered to be extinct until a small population was discovered in 1985 near Meeteetse, Wyoming. This small population was experiencing significant declines due to canine distemper and sylvatic plague. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) made the decision to capture remaining wild individuals from Meeteetse for captive breeding and species preservation. Eighteen ferrets were captured in 1986 and 1987 and have become the seed population for all subsequent captive breeding and recovery efforts. Under the revised Recovery Plan, all captive-reared ferrets in excess of a minimum of 200 individuals would be available for reintroduction into the wild. The present captive population exceeds this target and is the source for all ferrets released in the wild.

The Colorado State Legislature approved the reintroduction of black-footed ferrets into Colorado on April 18, 2000 (HB1314). This legislation and the subsequent Colorado Revised Statute 33-2-105.6 requires that ferret reintroduction activities be conducted in a manner consistent with the approach used in the Little Snake Resource Area Cooperative Management Plan dated June, 1995. Additionally, it calls for the recovery cooperators to provide regular updates to the local community on the status of reintroduction activities and requires that representatives of local government and affected interests be involved in the resolution of issues that may arise during the reintroduction effort. The formation of the Wolf Creek Work Group and the development of the local plan, "A Cooperative Plan for the Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction and Management for the Wolf Creek and Coyote Basin Management Areas; Moffat and Rio Blanco Counties, Colorado" (WC/CB Plan), is the culmination of those directives. The WC/CB plan was completed in October, 2001, and was signed by the Chair of both Moffat and Rio Blanco County Commissioners, the NW District Manager of the Colorado State Land Board, as well as representatives of the CDOW, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the USFWS. Participation in the WC/CB plan included representatives from mineral development, hunting, off-highway vehicle, general recreation and ranching, landowner, and local government interests. In addition, local open houses were held to accept additional public comment. The plan recognizes that existing land uses are important to the cultural and

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economic vitality of the local community and includes specific measures to ensure compatibility of the ferret release with these existing land uses.

Local acceptance of the reintroduction proposal was positive in a large part due to the USFWS designation of the reintroduction area as a "nonessential experimental population" (NEP). Such designation addresses concerns local citizens may have about possible ESA restrictions on federal and private lands and allows considerable flexibility in managing reintroduced endangered species. NEP designation allows for less restrictive regulations for the species and greater compatibility with established human activities.

After completion of the WC/CB plan, reintroduction of ferrets to Colorado occurred on November 15 and November 23, 2001. The public and media were invited to this historic occasion and both attendance and enthusiasm was high! A total of 43 ferrets (7 adults and 36 kits) were released in two separate areas: 35 in Wolf Creek and 8 in Coyote Basin (see attached map). Thirty-one radio collars were placed on kits and locations of these animals were determined by air and ground surveys for the duration of the collars (approximately 45 days). Due to the burrowing nature of ferrets, permanent collars are not an option as they have resulted in serious injury to the animal's necks. Instead, collars designed to fall off within a 30-45 day time period were utilized. In addition, all ferrets were equipped with 'pit tags' that allow identification of individual ferrets by utilizing a 'donut reader' placed around prairie dog holes showing sign of ferret activity. The donut reader scans the pit tags when a ferret enters and leaves a burrow, allowing for individual identification of the animal. Additional survey techniques have included snow tracking and spotlighting.

From the release date through January 7, 2002, biologists have found 10 dropped collars. Two collars appear to have slipped off live ferrets and the remaining eight are thought to be from dead animals. The dead ferrets appear to have been killed by natural predators such as coyote, great horned owl, and golden eagle. The conservative estimate for short term mortality (30 days post-release) is 26%, this is much lower than that of initial ferret releases, which experienced mortalities as high as 80%. The initial 30 day post release period is the most critical for ferret survival; once past that period black-footed ferrets have a survival rate between 40 and 60 percent.

Ground monitoring is scheduled to continue until early spring and will again pick up in late summer and early fall to determine if reproduction has occurred. If young of the year are found, then attempts will be made to capture these kits and implant pit tags for future individual identification.

Colorado will submit an allocation proposal to the USFWS in March requesting additional ferrets for release in fall, 2002. Another reintroduction is planned for November 2002, but will depend upon the number of ferrets available for allocation as well as the ranking of Colorado's allocation proposal as compared to other proposals. This release will be in the same Wolf Creek/Coyote Basin area and is intended to augment surviving ferrets. The goal of this reintroduction effort is to release sufficient numbers of ferrets into the Wolf Creek Management Area to establish a pre-breeding population of at least 20 adult ferrets by the fifth breeding season following the 2001 release. Reintroduction of ferrets in Coyote Basin is meant to complement Utah's Coyote Basin ferret management area and is integral for population objectives established for the Coyote Basin, Utah recovery site.

The CDOW is optimistic about this release and looks forward to the establishment of a small self-sufficient population of ferrets in NW Colorado. We wish to thank the Colorado State Legislature for approving this black-footed ferret reintroduction project and appreciate your continued support!