

Black-Footed Ferrets in 2004:

WHERE ARE THEY ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY?

By Helen Tarbert

Twenty-three years have passed since the discovery of eighteen black-footed ferrets near Meeteetse, Wyoming, leading to the program intended to re-establish that most endangered North American mammal species in the wild. To what extent has the effort succeeded?

There are currently six captive breeding facilities—including one in Canada—plus three outdoor pen breeding sites. Sixteen release sites are in use, including Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation, where releases began just this year. Two possible additional sites—one in Canada—have been identified.

In terms of breeding, Paul Marinari, biologist at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center at Sybille, pronounced this the third best year of the program. As of the first week of July, 380 kits had been born, with 350 surviving. Whelping continues. Because of population numbers, the greatest number of births occurred at Sybille. July 22 was the due date for the last litter expected at the facility.

Programs at other facilities are on a much smaller scale. At the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center (CRC) at Front Royal, Virginia, 14 jills were bred. By the third week of June, 16 kits had been born, and 3 more litters were due. Six of the females were artificially inseminated (AI)—a procedure developed at CRC by Dr. Jo Gayle Howard—and eight bred naturally. Four kits were the result of AI breeding, and 12 of natural. Kits born at CRC this year will not be preconditioned for release because of their great value to the overall gene pool.

(Remember that the original gene pool came from only seven ferrets.) Most valuable of all is a male, Badger, who shares the least number of genes with others in the group. He sired three of the AI-produced kits. Another member of the colony valuable for her genetic makeup is the jill, Bird. One of CRC's older ferrets is to be neutered to become part of the National Zoo's expanded display, scheduled to be completed this summer.

Unlike Sybille and CRC, the zoos involved in captive breeding are open to the public, though there is no admittance to breeding areas. The Louisville Zoological Gardens does have an observation room and a visitor-accessible camera focused on the kits. Twenty-four females



were bred this year at the facility, producing forty-three kits, with thirty-nine surviving. Seventeen babies were born at the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, and twenty-two at the Phoenix Zoo as of July 1. A unique feature of the program at the latter facility is change constantly. Most recent estimates: between 450 and 500 animals in the wild, and 260 in captivity. Repeatedly, success has

Feds Lift Ban on Prairie Dog Poisoning: BFFS MAY BE IN TROUBLE

The Black-Footed Ferret, North America's rarest mammal, may have a new threat to its road to recovery as a species. Following a decision by U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton to drop the black-tailed prairie dog as a candidate for the threatened species list, an agreement was reached to begin poisoning the prairie dogs again.

The U.S. Forest Service decided to lift its ban on poisoning prairie dogs on five national grasslands in South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming, the agency said in a letter to three regional foresters. Deputy Chief Tom Thompson rescinded an earlier directive that had effectively banned poisoning of prairie dogs on national forests and grasslands.

Under the plan, the Forest Service will provide \$120,000 to USDA-APHIS for poisoning on federal lands in Conata Basin and Fall River County beginning October 1. This will include Buffalo Gap Grassland, Idaho, the only successful site for BFF recovery.

continued on next page

been predicated upon establishment of 10 viable populations: 1,500 animals. At this time, there is only one self-sustaining site, in the Conata Basin in South Dakota, believed to be home to 300 BFFs. Not unrelated is the existence of the most extensive acreage of prairie dog colonies in that state. The largest single site covers 72,000 acres, and total acreage in the state is 400,000. These numbers may sound excessive to prairie dog-hating ranchers; they are not so in the terms of the needs of ferrets. The release site near Janos, Mexico (for which there had been high hopes, based on a large prairie dog population) has to date been a disappointment, the latest problem being severe drought.



Still, there are pluses: involvement of Ted Turner's Endangered Species program provided at least one additional release site. A facility to replace Sybille is being built near Carr, Colorado, from which it will take its name. Ground has been broken for the last building, the breeding facility, and the center is to open in October 2005. Merial donated \$5,000 worth of PUREVAX® Ferret

Distemper Vaccine to the program. Fish and Wildlife is hoping to re-establish connections with the Wildlife Foundation, which formerly matched donated funds.

Biologists conducted a biomedical survey in April of this year. Weather conditions shortened time in the field to seven days. Ten ferrets were trapped, two in Utah and eight in

continued on next page

Poisoning *from previous page*

Poisoning will be done as a response to landowner complaints on a case-by-case basis, not along the entire length of the federal-private border. Private contractors will do the poisoning, South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks Secretary John Cooper said.

Although Cooper states that in areas where prairie dogs will be poisoned, black-footed ferrets will be trapped and moved elsewhere, Defenders of Wildlife, Predators Conservation Alliance, and other environmental groups are concerned that the destruction of the prairie dog will derail the survival of the BFF and other prairie predators.

Dr. Nicole Rosmarino of Forest Guardians, a watch-dog organization, stated that the move by the

federal government is a "giant step backward for our American grasslands." "This plan would roll back the current restrictions against poisoning on National Grasslands, and result in the extermination of thousands of prairie dogs in the state," states Rosmarino in a June 22 Action Alert. "It could also force those landowners who like prairie dogs to kill them within a half-mile buffer of their property limits."

Jonathan Proctor of the Predator Conservation Alliance said his group would actively pursue a lawsuit over the South Dakota agreement. "This is a direct threat to an endangered species," he said.

Proctor said the high-level officials in the Bush administration forced the agreement upon federal biologists and land managers at the regional and local levels. "This is the

most blatant example of political interference endangering wildlife that I've ever seen," he said.

Predators Conservation Alliance joined with Forest Guardians, Center for Native Ecosystems, and Biodiversity Conservation Alliance in filing a 60-day notice of intent to sue over Norton's decision to drop the prairie dog as a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Earlier this spring, a Forest Service official in Chadron, Nebraska said an environmental impact statement must be completed before any poisoning could occur on the grasslands.

The recent Forest Service agreement appears to have changed that stance.

— Compiled via various news sources

BFF *from previous page*

Wyoming. Procedures included drawing blood and collecting semen for freezing. Participants declared themselves pleased with results, though they had hoped for higher Utah numbers.

If we were to construct a graph illustrating the extent of recovery, how high should the line go? One scientist would take it to 25 percent. Crunch numbers again. Even taking into account litters still to be born, total births in the program for the year are unlikely to exceed 700. A vital question is how many of those released will survive and breed in the wild.

CONCLUSION

Black-footed ferrets are no longer on the brink of extinction. Captive breeding has produced encouraging results. However, as of summer, 2004, recovery is still an unmet goal. Extending that graph line above 25 percent will require all of the following: a slowing down of habitat destruction—thus allowing less fragmented colonies; the inclusion of the prairie dog on the Endangered Special list; more private funding to replace government funds; and a campaign to alter the mindset of those in the zoo community who seem to believe that mega in size means more deserving of publicity and funding. An immediate action we should all take is participating in the Black-Footed Ferret Adoption Program. Raise that graph line with your dollars and your voices!

Travis Livieri of Prairie Wildlife Research is working on a package deal, allowing people who donate to recovery to be part of spotlighting and/or release trips. Watch for details.

What's Happening in the AFA Membership Committee

By Laura Williams

Hi all, I am Laura Williams, the new director of the American Ferret Association Membership Committee. Along with my wonderful committee members, I am working hard to promote AFA membership.

Our mission is to promote new membership to the AFA and help improve the current membership package. We are so excited about this mission. We hope to bring new ideas and implement our ideas for you and the AFA organization.

We have drafted letters and special flyers to be sent to the veterinary community to go along with the following: the AFA Health Affairs special veterinary alerts, AFA Legislative special alerts, and Purevax vaccine literature from Merial who was sponsor of AFA's last veterinary conference. We are currently working on a new ad to be placed in Ferrets magazine. Hopefully it will catch some eyes and help increase our membership enrollment.

Our goals this year include conducting a member survey, reviewing all membership documents and updating where needed, and further developing membership benefits and structure.

The Membership Committee would also like to hear from our members. If you have an idea or suggestion, please feel free to enter your input and help us grow. As a team, we can do a great job! I would also like to thank all my committee members for their support and their time. Keep up the great work!

The AFA Membership Committee is looking for volunteers to help succeed in our mission. You can make a difference in a life of a ferret. Volunteer today!

Laura Williams, AFA Membership Committee Director, can be reached via e-mail at fuzzykids@msn.com.

MEET YOUR CURRENT AFA MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE

| Name | State | # of Ferrets |
|----------------|-------|--------------|
| Laura Williams | MI | 8 |
| Wendy Loughlin | NY | 3 |
| Kathy Bulgrin | WI | 17 |
| Deborah Harvey | PA | 2 |
| Terri Jack | NE | 4 |