

## Thunder Basin Record of Decision Backgrounder

### Introduction

Today, the U.S. Forest Service dealt a devastating blow to the critically-endangered [black-footed ferret](#). Once a posterchild of success for the Endangered Species Act, the ferret is losing its fight toward recovery. [Thunder Basin National Grassland](#), a 500,000-acre prairie grassland in Eastern Wyoming and noted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as one of the best possible areas for ferret reintroduction, has adopted a new management plan amendment allowing for the widespread poisoning and shooting of prairie dogs on these public lands.

Thunder Basin's expansive grasslands can support large complexes of prairie dog burrows needed to sustain black-footed ferrets. The prairie dog is a keystone species, an ecosystem engineer that also contributes to the viability of other native wildlife and for overall grassland health. Black-footed ferrets rely primarily on prairie dogs for survival and currently only live in areas where a prairie dog colony already exists. Without protections for prairie dogs, it is unlikely black-footed ferrets will ever be reintroduced at Thunder Basin, dooming the recovery effort entirely.

#### 1. Prairie Dogs

Black-tailed prairie dogs are vital to the ecosystem of the Great Plains, supporting countless species like mountain plover, burrowing owl, Ferruginous hawks, and, of course, the black-footed ferret. While prairie dogs are not considered endangered by FWS, they have lost 97% of their habitat within their historic range. Due to plague, poisoning and recreational shooting, the species currently only lives in scattered regions across the Great Plains, which has greatly impacted the multitude of species that rely on prairie dogs to survive.

The black-footed ferret will have no chance for recovery in the wild without the prairie dog. Even though prairie dog range has reduced dramatically, there are still several thriving prairie dog habitats across the Great Plains that could support a population of black-footed ferrets.

#### 2. The Black-Footed Ferret

The black-footed ferret is North America's only native species of ferret and remains one of the most critically endangered species on the Great Plains. Currently, there are only 350 ferrets in their entire range in the wild spread across 29 sites. The ferret was thought extinct in the 1970s until a rancher's dog found a colony in Wyoming in 1981. Government scientists took the last remaining ferrets to begin a captive-breeding program to recover the species. Since then, Defenders of Wildlife has helped reintroduce black-footed ferrets to small portions of their historical range in the Great Plains region of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, including the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana, Conata Basin/Buffalo Gap National Grassland and Badlands National Park in South Dakota, and on private ranches in Kansas. However, few of these reintroduction sites can support more than 30 breeding female adults.

The main reason black-footed ferrets have not been able to spread beyond these small colonies is their reliance on prairie dogs and the dramatic loss of prairie dogs throughout their range. Black-tailed prairie dogs have disappeared from approximately 97% of their historic range across the Great Plains. This is largely due to sylvatic plague devastating prairie dog colonies and also impacting ferret populations,

despite plague mitigation tools applied on the designated ferret recovery sites. While the ferrets also eat ground squirrels, small rodents, rabbits, and birds, over 90 percent of their diet is the prairie dog. Black-footed ferrets also use prairie dog burrows to eat, sleep, and raise their young. Essentially, the black-footed ferret cannot survive in the wild without prairie dogs.

### **3. Thunder Basin National Grassland**

The U.S. Forest Service has managed Thunder Basin National Grassland to become a black-footed ferret reintroduction site since 1988. Thunder Basin has the capacity to support well over 18,000 acres of prairie dog colonies, which is the very minimum to support 100 breeding adult ferrets. Recently, the FWS identified the grassland as [best possible site](#) to reintroduce the black-footed ferret in the United States. However, in 2019, the Forest Service made an abrupt about-face and began the process of changing its management plan to eliminate protections for prairie dogs against the threats of poisoning and shooting and block the path to ferret recovery. That decision was finalized today.

The Forest Service's decision to amend its management plan and undermine ferret recovery is an appeasement to local livestock ranchers, particularly a few who lease public grazing allotments in the grassland. Ranchers have complained that prairie dogs compete with their cattle for forage. Livestock grazing currently occurs across over 90% of the grassland, meaning in most cases prairie dogs do not interact in any meaningful way with the cattle.

Despite the present imbalance in management area purposes, the management plan amendment will now eliminate a 56,000-acre protected area that has been off-limits to prairie dog poisoning and shooting and had a goal of maintaining at least 18,000 acres of prairie dog colonies to support ferret reintroduction. The management area comprises less than 10% of the grassland, but its loss will enable poisoning and shooting across the whole of Thunder Basin. The amendment also set a cap of 10,000 acres of prairie dog colonies within this area with the ability to cap that area at 7,500 acres during drought conditions—not enough to support a viable population of ferrets. Moreover, the Forest Service has backed away from its plans to reintroduce ferrets on the grassland. These changes will eliminate any chance that the black-footed ferret could viably be reintroduced to Thunder Basin and will eradicate decades of progress. The decision threatens recovering the species throughout its range.

Additionally, the decision is detrimental to the countless species, in addition to the ferret, that rely on prairie dogs. For example, the mountain plover and burrowing owl are dependent on prairie dog colony habitat in the Great Plains, and the amendment risks their survival in Thunder Basin.