

## NRCS Black-Footed Ferret Special Effort

Colorado's Implementation Plan FY2014 through FY2024

### Special Effort Overview

The purpose of the special effort is to promote voluntary, incentive-based conservation on private and Tribal lands, with the primary objective of encouraging landowner participation in black-footed ferret (BFF) recovery while strengthening the productive capacity of working lands and rural economies.

This effort is being implemented across the species range encompassing portions of 12 states; to assist in the recovery goals for down listing or delisting this federally endangered species. In Colorado, the goal is to enroll 1 to 3 relocation sites each year for a four year period (2014-2018).

This effort will be funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) under funding code 'BFF Special Effort'. This effort is not part of the Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) partnership program.

### Outreach

NRCS's partners will provide the majority of the outreach effort and will recognize landowners interested in, and potentially eligible for, black-footed ferret recovery. NRCS has provided outreach materials for this effort.

#### *Overview of Potentially Suitable Sites:*

1. Non-federal lands (including tribal lands) within the historic range of the ferret,
2. that have adequate acres of occupied prairie dog habitat to support a population of at least 30 breeding adult ferrets. This acreage requirement may be provided by several participating landowners.

When there is landowner interest, the NRCS-BFF certified planner<sup>[1]</sup> and the USFWS-BFF recovery team member will be brought into discussions with the landowner. It may be important to also include Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and/or Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) at this early stage, depending upon the situation and need. A landowner information packet has been developed to help facilitate conversation on the reintroduction process, the Safe Harbor Agreement, responsibilities of each party, and the benefits of participating in the BFF Special Effort.

It is recommended to have these discussions with the landowner on their property, so that a brief assessment of the landscape can be made to determine if it has *potential* to be a suitable site. [Appendix B](#) provides the basic criteria for this assessment, the NRCS-BFF certified planner<sup>[1]</sup> may use this information to assist in this initial assessment.

If the site has potential to be a suitable site and the landowner is interesting in participating in ferret recovery, an EQIP application may be submitted, and the NRCS and USFWS will start the process of determining eligibility. Note: If the landowner is interested in pursuing ferret reintroduction without NRCS financial assistance, NRCS may still provide technical assistance.

*PII Waiver.* Due to the nature of this unique partnership effort between the landowners, NRCS, and the USFWS; a written waiver will need to be granted by the landowner to allow Personally Identifiable Information (PII) to be shared between parties. A template waiver is provided, however any written format is acceptable.

<sup>[1]</sup> BFF Certified Planner. This species is not included in the WLFW partnership program; however, it will have planner certification similar to the requirements of WLFW. Certification will require knowledge of black-footed ferret and prairie dog ecology (species' life history, distribution, habitat requirements, and historic perspective); and a working knowledge of the 2013 Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Plan and Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement. The state roster of BFF certified planners will be included in the WLFW roster ([FOTG](#), Section II-SEC-T&E).

## Eligibility

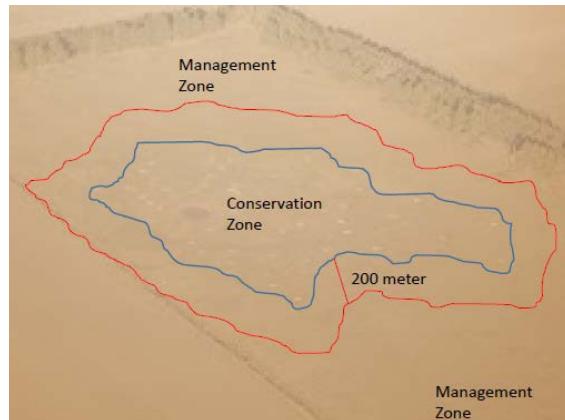
Only sites that are eligible for the 2013 BFF Safe Harbor Agreement<sup>2]</sup> or for ESA Section 10(j) (as determined by USFWS BFF recovery team) **and** eligible for EQIP will be considered eligible for the BFF Special Effort.

<sup>2]</sup> Safe Harbor Eligibility. In Colorado, state lands are not currently eligible. Municipalities may be eligible, as authorized [HB 14-1267](#), which was signed in May 17, 2014 by Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper. For full eligibility requirements refer to the [2013 BFF Safe Harbor Agreement](#).

The USFWS BFF recovery team will make the final determination if the site is eligible for the 2013 BFF Safe Harbor Agreement or for ESA Section 10(j). If found eligible, the USFWS will enter into more in-depth discussion with the landowner on their goals and objectives, assessment of potential conflicts with adjoining landowners, and boundary configurations of the Conservation and Management Zones. Below are a few items that will be considered in-depth:

The Conservation Zone will generally cover the prairie dog colony complex and an expansion buffer (generally a 200 meter buffer) to allow colony growth and/or movement. A property may contain a single Conservation Zone, or several. These zones are negotiated between the USFWS and the landowner(s).

- Areas with potential prairie dog colony encroachment onto non-participating lands will not be considered in the Conservation Zone and may result in non-eligibility if the minimum zone size cannot be achieved.
- The expansion buffer will only include lands that have the potential to allow colony growth and/or movement (it is not always a set distance around the conservation zone).



The Management Zone is generally a buffer around the Conservation Zone where prairie dogs may be managed by the landowner using USFWS approved conservation actions.

If all items are determined acceptable, the USFWS will provide NRCS a ‘letter of intent’ to reintroduce black-footed ferrets or to allow an expansion of an existing/planned reintroduction site.

*Letter of Intent.* This provides the documentation for NRCS to consider the project eligible for the BFF Special Effort. Eligible projects will be ranked to compete for funding. The letter of intent will include the areas identified as the Conservation and Management Zones and documentation of the intra-agency consultation for ESA Section 7.

**Conservation Plan Development.** Provided below is planning guidance specific for this effort:

Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645) will be required in the NRCS Conservation Plan to cover the area identified as the Conservation Zone (as defined by the USFWS in the “letter of intent” or reintroduction plan). NRCS will work with the USFWS to obtain a shapefile of the Conservation Zone to ensure consistency between the conservation plan and the reintroduction plan.

- The Conservation Zone will include landowner monitoring requirements (refer to the following section).
- The Management Zone will *not be* covered by 645; this prairie dog control area does not meet 645 criteria.
- The 645 criteria to use a habitat evaluation/assessment will be met by the USFWS eligibility assessment and determination. A NRCS Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guide (WHEG) is not available or required.
- Addressing Plague Management (i.e. flea dusting). Based on policy in the GM\_190\_404\_Part 404: “*NRCS shall not provide assistance in suppressing pests in or on animals (e.g., fly suppression for livestock, worm suppression for goats).*” This has been verified with the NRCS national office that this includes prairie dog flea dusting. Landowners are not required to conduct plague control; interested landowners will be referred to the USFWS and/or APHIS for assistance. A landowner handout is available, titled “[Protecting Black-Footed Ferrets and Prairie Dogs Against Sylvatic Plague](#)” (USGS, 2011).

Prescribed Grazing (528) may be used when the conservation planner has identified livestock production limitations, plant health, or other related resource concerns; and when the landowner would like to address those concerns.

- The grazing plan (528) should include the prairie dog colony which will overlap the Conservation Zone (CPS 645). \*However, the 528 payment will not overlay 645 payment, see the contracting sections below.
- Supporting/facilitative practices may be used when necessary to alter the grazing system to accommodate for the ferret reintroduction effort. Practices may include: Fence (382), Pipeline (516), Watering Facility (614), Watering Well (642), or as determined appropriate in the planning process.

*Resource Concerns.* The primary resource concern will be “Animals: Inadequate Habitat for Fish & Wildlife”. Additional resource concerns may include, but are not limited to, “Animal: Livestock Production Limitations”, “Human: Economic/Social Consideration”, “Human: Land Use Change”, and/or “Plants: Degraded Plant Condition”.

*ESA Section 7 Consultation* will be handled on an individual project basis. The USFWS (BFF recovery team) will complete intra-agency consultation with USFWS (ecological services). The findings will be included on, or attached to, the ‘letter of intent’. This will serve as NRCS’s section 7 consultation. Document the findings on NRCS-CPA-52 under T&E, and attached the letter.

*Toolkit ESA Predictability Tracking Tool* was developed for WLFW, but will be used to track enrollment in the BFF Special Effort. NRCS planners will ensure that BFF enrolled acres are entered into this reporting tool.

If funded, the USFWS will work concurrently with final NRCS planning efforts to develop the reintroduction plan. Many of the items identified in the reintroduction plan will be carried-over into the NRCS conservation plan.

### CPS 645 Monitoring Requirements

The practice Upland Wildlife Habitat Mgmt. (645) payment for “Monitoring and Mgmt., Medium Intensity” requires that the landowner conduct quantitative monitoring that is medium in complexity and intensity. This is pre-defined for the BFF Special Effort as follows:

- I. Quarterly monitor prairie dog populations to assess density of prairie dogs within the colonies. A visual protocol to count prairie dogs is provided in [Appendix C](#).
- II. Conduct annual, photo point monitoring to document and compare the overall vegetative and landscape responses; this will include landscape points and 1m vegetation photos. Photo points will also be established at conservation zone boundary edges, where there is potential for the colony to expand beyond the boundary.

The complexity of the monitoring will require that the landowner attend training. Training may be provided by NRCS or the USFWS on a group or individual basis.

The landowner may contract to have the monitoring completed, at the landowner’s expense. It will be the landowner’s responsibility to provide the contractor with the monitoring requirements and guidelines.

The USFWS, and/or its representatives, will conduct ferret monitoring (such as spotlighting) as required by the Permit for the Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA). The landowners may be encouraged to voluntarily participate, but it is not required for the CPS 645 payment.

### Contracting

- **CPS 645 payment for “Monitoring and Management, Medium Intensity with FI”** is authorized to be used on the Conservation Zone (as defined by the USFWS in the “letter of intent” or reintroduction plan). This payment may be scheduled for up to 3 consecutive years. The general EQIP payment schedule will be used (i.e. not the Special Initiative payment schedule). Any state imposed management payment caps will apply.

The scenario for FY2016 is provided below:

Code	Component Name	Unit Cost (ac)	Scenario Description
645	Monitoring and Mgmt, Medium Intensity with FI	E slope \$13.85 E HU \$16.61  W slope \$14.96 W HU\$17.72	This component is intended to be part of a conservation system which addresses inadequate upland habitat conditions. Monitoring will be used to determine if the conservation system meets or exceeds the minimum quality criteria for the targeted wildlife. Management will be implemented based on the findings of the habitat assessment and monitoring. Habitat management and monitoring may require training, no qualitative data assessment, no water quality monitoring and is medium in complexity and intensity monitoring. Decisions or

			treatments associated with this practice or facilitating practices will require income foregone (annual net income loss from a land use change, or <u>opportunity cost of accepting less farm income in exchange for improved resource conditions due to the practice</u> ). The planner will specify locations and identify the methods to the customer who will implement the monitoring and management plan.
--	--	--	---

- **CPS 528 payment for “Habitat Management Standard”** may be contracted on acres not included in the Conservation Zone. Please note that the grazing plan (528) may cover the entire operation, including the Conservation Zone; however, the 645 and 528 payments will not overlap.

Code	Component Name	Unit Cost (ac)	Scenario Description
528	Range Standard	E slope \$2.16 W slope \$2.56	

- CPS Supporting Practices may be contracted, as appropriate.

*Contract Length.* The length of the contract will follow NRCS contracting procedures. In most cases, the CPS 645 payment will be used for three years (programmatic allowed maximum duration).

#### *Contracting in the event of plague:*

If plague occurs before the release of black-footed ferrets, and affects the colony to the extent that release is not possible within the first year of the contract, then the contract will be canceled. Note: the applicant must request cancellation, and the NRCS BFF Certified Planner<sup>[1]</sup> will provide the justification.

If plague occurs after the release, the contract may be modified instead of canceled. Any remaining planned supporting practices may remain in the contract; however, the 645 payment will be modified out of the contract for the years where ferrets are not occurring on the site. If the site only had a partial die-off and ferrets remain, the 645 payment may be modified by a reduction of acres, as appropriate to the new site conditions.

These failed recover sites may have the potential to re-enroll in the BFF Special Effort when the colony recovers to the point that the site is determined to be suitable again for release. Re-enrollment must meet program policy (there may be issues with re-enrolling the same payment). Each situation will be carefully evaluated by the NRCS Programs Staff in coordination with the BFF Certified Planner<sup>[1]</sup>.

#### *Contracting in the event of participant drop-out on a multi-participant site:*

Where there are multiple participants coming together to meet the minimum acreage for a BFF suitable site (i.e. a complex, see [Appendix B](#)), the following provisions apply in the event that one or more participants withdraw acreage from participation in the Safe Harbor or 10(j) (i.e. they no longer want BFF on their property).

The USFWS-BFF recovery team member will reevaluate the complex and determine if it is still a viable complex of suitable habitat. If it is, the BFF Certified Planner<sup>[1]</sup> will notify the Area and State Office; no contractual actions are needed. If it is determined that the site is no longer a viable complex but ferrets will remain on-site, then the BFF Certified Planner<sup>[1]</sup> will notify the Area and State Office; no contractual actions are needed.

- If ferrets will be removed from the complex (effort abandoned) then NRCS Programs Staff in coordination with the BFF Certified Planner<sup>[1]</sup> will need to evaluate each associated contract and make a determination of how to most appropriately address the contractual issues.

Note: every effort will be made by all parties involved to seek out participation from surrounding landowners. NRCS will consider these areas a priority for expansion enrollment. The BFF team will recommend FY16 EQIP ranking questions to address this priority.

#### **Conservation Easements**

There may be opportunity through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to offer conservation easements for this effort. Information will be announced, as it becomes available.

#### **Other NRCS Programs**

There may be opportunity through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CStP) to continue these efforts. Information will be announced, as it becomes available.

## **General Partner Responsibilities**

1] Notification of Change in Participation. The USFWS-BFF recovery team member will notify NRCS in the event that a participant has/will withdraw from Safe Harbor/10(j) participation, when there are active NRCS contracts associated to the complex. The NRCS will notify the USFWS-BFF recovery team member in the event that any participant has/will withdraw, cancel, or terminate an application or contract under the BFF Special Effort (this is permitted under the PII waiver).

2] Implementation Plan Revisions. NRCS will update and revise the implementation plan as new situations and needs arise. The plan will be reviewed and concurred upon by all parties involved before final revision.

### **NRCS Contact**

Chanda Pettie, CO State Biologist, Denver Federal Center, Building 56, Denver, CO 80225-0426, telephone (720) 544-2804, email: [chanda.pettie@co.usda.gov](mailto:chanda.pettie@co.usda.gov)

### **USFWS Contact**

Pete Gober, BFF Recovery Coordinator (Permittee), National Black-Footed Ferret Center, P.O. Box 190, Wellington, Colorado 80549, telephone (970) 897-2730 x224, email: [pete\\_gober@fws.gov](mailto:pete_gober@fws.gov)

John Hughes, Wildlife Biologist, National Black-Footed Ferret Center, P.O. Box 190, Wellington, Colorado 80549, telephone (970) 897-2730 x229, email: [john\\_hughes@fws.gov](mailto:john_hughes@fws.gov)

### **APHIS Contact**

Mike Yeary, State Director, Colorado Wildlife Services, 12345 W. Alameda Parkway Suite 204, Lakewood, CO 80228, telephone (303) 236-5813, email: [Mike.A.Yeary@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:Mike.A.Yeary@aphis.usda.gov)

### **CPW Contact**

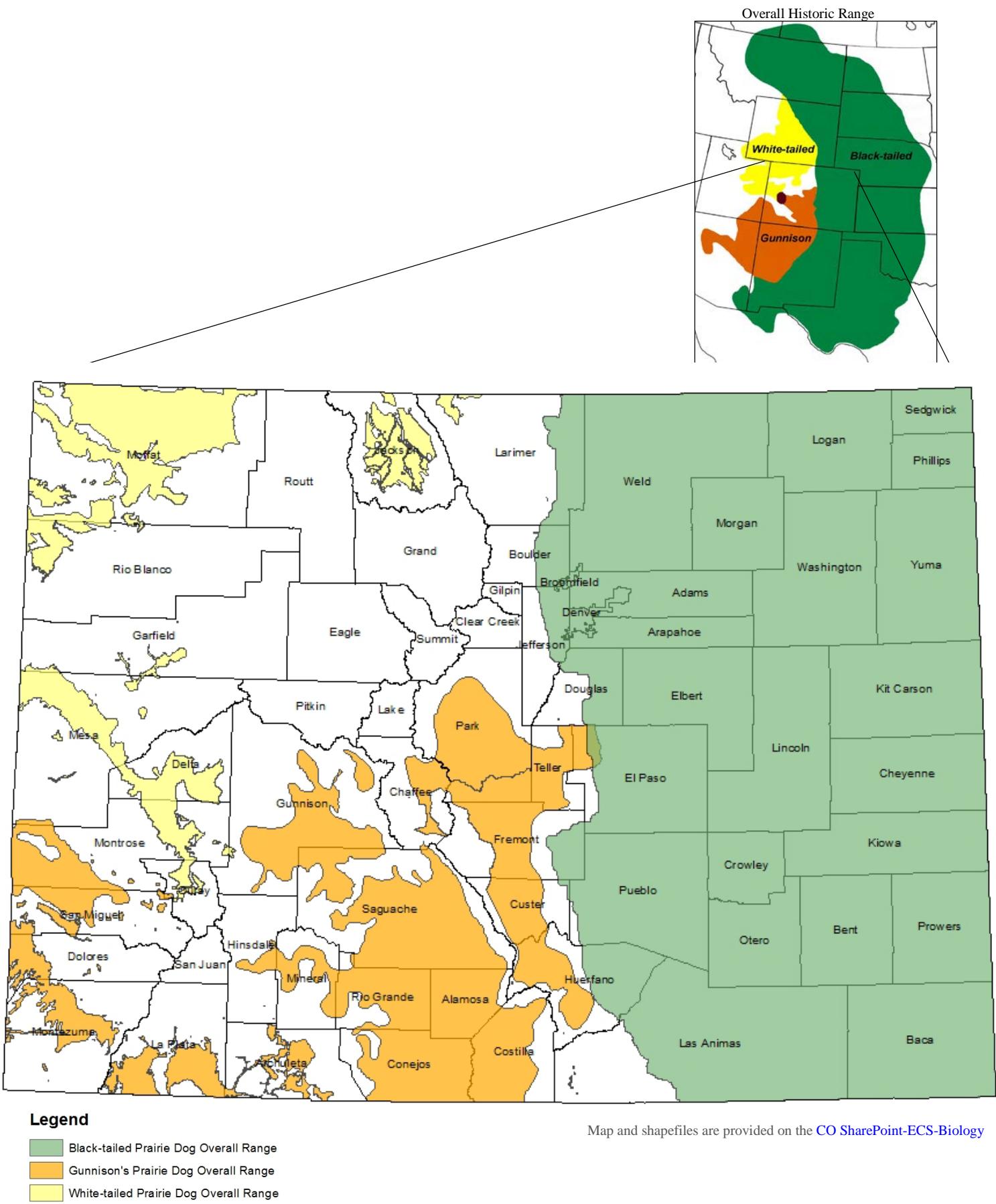
Ken Morgan, Private Lands Program Manager. telephone (303) 291-7404, email: [ken.morgan@state.co.us](mailto:ken.morgan@state.co.us)

## **REFERENCE**

DOI, 2013. [Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Revised Recovery Plan for the Black-Footed Ferret](#). Fish and Wildlife Service. December 23, 2013. Federal Register.

DOI, 2013. [Black-footed Ferret Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement](#). Fish and Wildlife Service. October 23, 2013.

## Appendix A – Historical Range of Prairie Dogs and Black-Footed Ferrets



## Appendix B – Basic Criteria for Black-Footed Ferret Suitable Habitat

### SAFE HARBOR DEFINITION

**Black-Footed Ferret Suitable Site:** Non-federal lands (including tribal lands) within the historical range of the black-footed ferret, that have adequate acres of occupied prairie dog habitat to support a population of at least 30 breeding adult ferrets.

*USFWS 2013 Black-Footed Ferret Programmatic Safe Harbor Agreement*

NRCS may use the criteria provide below to assess whether a site has the potential to be suitable habitat for the black-footed ferret. This basic assessment may be needed for outreach efforts and to help identify if a new site warrants further evaluation by USFWS.

**I. Occurs within the BFF Historic Range.** Refer to Appendix A for a map location of the historic range. An ArcGIS map and associated shape files are on the [NRCS SharePoint, ECS-Biology](#), under BFF Special Effort.

**II. Has Adequate Acres of Occupied Prairie Dog Habitat.** The acreage necessary to support 30 breeding adults varies depending on the species of prairie dogs present:

- For black-tailed prairie dogs, this requires a minimum of **1,500 acres** of occupied habitat<sup>1]</sup>.
- For white-tailed or Gunnison's prairie dogs, this requires a minimum of **3,000 acres** of occupied habitat<sup>1]</sup>.

Appendix A provides a generalized map of prairie dog ranges by species. If unsure of the species, contact CPW or FWS to assist.

<sup>1]</sup> **Occupied Prairie Dog Habitat.** Occupied prairie dog habitat consists of a grouping of prairie dog colonies in close proximity to each other. The entire acreage is not expected to be one large prairie dog colony.

As a general rule, the USFWS will be looking at colony size and distance between colonies to make the final determination. For purpose of this basis assessment, NRCS only needs to determine acres of the overall complex of prairie dog colonies.

### Ownership Complexes

Suitable sites are not required to be provided by a single landowner. Adjacent landowners can collectively enroll lands (in the Safe Harbor/10(j)) to provide sufficient acreage to support 30 breeding adult ferrets.

Additionally, a suitable site may or may not be entirely comprised of landowners participating in the BFF Special Effort though NRCS.

**Appendix C – Monitoring Protocol****PRAIRIE DOG OCCUPANCY SURVEY FORM**

Surveyor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Start Survey Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Prairie Dog Colony Identifier: \_\_\_\_\_ End Survey Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (the survey must be completed for 3 consecutive days)

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

Survey Date	Plot ID	Count # Remember to wait 15 minutes between counts	Site Conditions <sup>1]</sup>		Start Time	End Time	Number of Individual Prairie Dog Observed	Comments
			Wind Speed	Cloud (%)				
		1						
		2						
		3						
		4						
Average Number of Prairie Dogs (total count/4):								
		1						
		2						
		3						
		4						
Average Number of Prairie Dogs (total count/4):								
		1						
		2						
		3						
		4						
Average Number of Prairie Dogs (total count/4):								
		1						
		2						
		3						
		4						
Average Number of Prairie Dogs (total count/4):								
		1						
		2						
		3						
		4						
Average Number of Prairie Dogs (total count/4):								
		1						
		2						
		3						
		4						

<sup>1]</sup> Do not monitor in inclement weather: cloud cover >40; snow covered ground; and wind >12 mph.

Wind Speed (Beaufort Scale)

0-1 mph: Smoke rises vertically

1-3 mph: Wind motion visible in smoke.

3-7 mph: Wind on exposed skin, leaves rustle.

8-12 mph: Leaves and smaller twigs in constant motion.

13-17 mph: Dust and loose paper raised, small branches begin to move

*Use additional pages if needed.*

Overall Average Number of Prairie Dogs: \_\_\_\_\_

## Visual Counts Monitoring Method: Prairie Dogs

**Goal:** To estimate the average number of prairie dogs within a given sub-set of an established prairie dog colony.

**Tools needed:** binoculars (10 power maximum magnification), a watch, data sheets/pen, a 3-m high observation platform, and fluorescent stakes/flagging/hammer.

**Plot Delineation:** Define a plot on the colony that is 656 x 656 feet which is approximately 10 acres (200 x 200 meters or 4 ha). Several plots will be necessary per release site (generally 3-4), as determined at enrollment. Plot boundaries will be delineated using fluorescent stakes/flagging (a stake at each corner of the plot). The same plots may be used for each monitoring period.

**Timing:** Counts will be made when prairie dogs are most active above ground; generally ½ hour after sunrise to 10:00am, and then again 2 hours before sunset until sunset. Avoid monitoring in inclement weather: cloud cover >40; snow covered ground; and wind >12 mph.

**Protocol:**

- The observation platform/blind will be established at one corner of the plot; that has an unobstructed view of the entire plot.
- For a Morning Count: Observers enter the platform/blind at sunrise (about 7:00 am) and wait 30 minutes before beginning the morning count (this allows time for prairie dogs to resume normal activity).  
For an Evening Count: Observers enter the platform/blind 3 hours before sunset (about 3:00 pm) and wait 30 minutes before beginning the morning count (this allows time for prairie dogs to resume normal activity).
- Count all prairie dogs seen (within the established plot) by slowly scanning with the binoculars. Do not try to rescan the area several times; just use one, slow sweeping pass. Record the number on the data form.
- Repeat the count for a total of 4 consecutive times, waiting 15 minutes between counts.  
*This should take about 1 hour and 15 minutes per plot. With the timing restrictions, this could allow for up two plot counts in the am, and potentially two more in the pm (no more than 4 plots per day).*
- It is critical that this process is repeated for 3 consecutive days. Also, if a plot was counted in the am then the remaining two consecutive days must be counted in the am (and vice versa). However, the blind may be moved to different corners of the plot (from day to day) to obtain a different view.

**Monitoring Period:** Monitoring will be conducted quarterly for three consecutive years; beginning the first year for the contract.

**Reporting:** The landowner/operator will submit monitoring data sheets quarterly to the NRCS conservation planner (for black-footed ferret), shortly after monitoring is completed.

The planner will look for irregularities from the previous monitoring periods; a significant decline in numbers may indicate the potential for plague. The overall trend may indicate colony health or risk for plague. The data sheets will be provided to the USFWS annually, unless requested prior. This information is privacy protected (the landowner waiver to release information will allow the NRCS to transfer data to the USFWS).

---

In addition to this protocol, the monitoring payment requires that the landowner also conduct the following monitoring:

- Annually monitor the prairie dog complex boundaries to: 1] assess whether expansion is occurring within the individual colonies; and to 2] identify if boundary control may be necessary to confine the ferret population to the Conservation Zone. This can be accomplished by traversing the perimeter of an active prairie dog colony with a GPS and can be documented with resulting map and/or GIS shapefile.  
Photo points will be established at boundary edges where there is potential for boundary encroachment; this will be used to document and compare colony expansion from year to year.
- Conduct annual, photo point monitoring to document and compare the overall vegetative and landscape responses. This will include landscape points and 1m vegetation photos.