# The Endangered Species Act at 40
## Black-footed Ferret Recovery
## Buffalo Gap National Grassland, South Dakota

By the early 1970s, the black-footed ferret native to the North American prairies and prairie dog 'towns' was thought to be extinct. A small number of ferrets were rediscovered in the late-1980s prompting a captive breeding program to recover the species from the brink of extinction. The captive breeding efforts proved to be successful and showed promise in reintroduction black-footed ferrets back into their native habitat, black-tailed prairie dog colonies.

A multi-agency collaboration between federal agencies including the USDA Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Park Service resulted in ferret reintroductions at Conata Basin/Badlands , South Dakota, in the mid-1990s and eventually transformed Conata Basin, Buffalo Gap National Grassland, into one of the most successful ferret restoration programs on the continent.. The program has been so successful that until recent years was a key donor site of wild-born kits for establishing other recovery sites in the west.

In 2008, sylvatic plague was discovered in the Conata Basin /Badlands recovery area and quickly eliminated about two-thirds of the 30,000 acres of prairie dog colonies and ferret habitat. Current management to counteract plague involves insecticide applications (dusting) to reduce flea numbers which are believed to be the key vector in spreading plague. This prompted the three federal agencies involved with ferret reintroductions along with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to begin an insecticide dusting effort on select prairie dog colonies to reduce flea populations in hopes of maintaining a ferret population. The dusting efforts have maintained approximately 11,000 acres of ferret occupied prairie dog colonies.

Figure 1. Black-footed ferrets in the Conata Basin/Badlands region.

Figure 2. Black-tailed prairie dog killed from sylvatic plague.

Dusting efforts continue to maintain this flagship recovery population and its habitat, while researchers continue to work on an oral sylvatic plague vaccine that could prove to be more effective and cost-efficient in controlling the impacts of the plague virus and continuing the black-footed ferret on the road to national recovery..

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