USDA Forest Service Update
March 2014
Subject: Black-Tailed Prairie Dog and Black-Footed Ferret

Issue: Sustaining prairie dogs to support black-footed ferret recovery and conservation of the ecosystem and associated species, on National Grasslands in South Dakota, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Texas.

Key Points:

- The prairie dog ecosystem on the national grasslands provides important habitat for the endangered black-footed ferret and other native prairie species.
- Plague, a non-native disease, has significantly reduced prairie dog populations across most of their range and represents one of the greatest challenges to national recovery of the black-footed ferret. Since 2007 (pre-plague), 76% of active prairie dog colony acres have been lost to plague on the Buffalo Gap National Grassland in Conata Basin (SD). The black-footed ferret population has similarly declined in the recovery area that includes adjacent Badlands National Park.
- An insecticide dust (Delta Dust) is used in specific areas to kill plague-infested fleas, which prevents spreading but is labor-intensive, costly, and must be repeated each year to be effective. The Forest Service is cooperating in field testing of a promising sylvatic plague vaccine (SPV) developed jointly by the USGS National Wildlife Health Center and University of Wisconsin-Madison and may represent a longer-term, more effective plague management tool in prairie dog communities and ferret recovery sites.

Summaries by Region:

Northern Region (Region 1)

- Prairie dog populations on the Little Missouri National Grassland are managed to establish two or more complexes in both the badlands geographic area and in the rolling prairie geographic area, while also maintaining the "good neighbor" policy. There are six prairie dog focal areas totaling about 5,000 acres. Plague has not yet been confirmed on the Little Missouri, but has been found nearby.

Rocky Mountain Region (Region 2)

- For 2013, 545,320 burrows in 13,626 acres of prairie dog habitat located in the Conata Basin and Badlands National Park were dusted. This is part of a large-scale cooperative effort between the Forest Service, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and several non-governmental organizations to maintain a core area of the original Conata Basin/Badlands ferret recovery area until approval of the SPV.
- The black-tailed prairie dog population on the Thunder Basin National Grassland has been impacted by sylvatic plague in 2002, 2006 and 2007 and is currently recovering from significant population declines related to plague. Prairie dog colony acreage was at 22,890 acres pre-plague in 2001. Plague caused prairie dog colony acreage to drop to about 4,322 acres in 2007. Acres rose to an estimated 9,600 acres in 2011 and over 23,000 acres in 2013. Dusting has been carried out annually since 2010.
- Various management actions from the 2009 Thunder Basin prairie dog management strategy have been implemented between 2010 and 2013; however, implementation has generated conflict and controversy with some area ranchers and grazing permittees over ongoing boundary encroachment problems. The district is cooperating with the state of Wyoming and revisiting its prairie dog management strategy to explore ways to be more effective on the boundary issue while still adhering to some of the main objectives of the 2009 plan: maintain and restore the short grass prairie ecosystem, allow for the potential reintroduction of the black footed ferret, and

maintain viable populations of prairie dogs and other associated species, such as mountain plover, burrowing owl, and ferruginous hawk..

Southwestern Region (Region 3)

- The Cibola NF - Kiowa-Rita Blanca National Grassland continues to participate in the Texas black-footed ferret working group to determine the feasibility of reintroducing black-footed ferrets into Texas. The "High Lonesome" area on the Rita Blanca National Grassland has been highlighted as a potential reintroduction site. A Memorandum of Understanding involving several agencies was signed in 2012 to encourage interagency cooperation for the management of black-tailed prairie dog habitat for a potential reintroduction of black-footed ferrets.
- Mapping of prairie dog colonies is important to determine prairie dog densities and colony expansion/contraction. Mapping of the prairie dog colonies did not occur in 2013 because of lack of funding. Within the "High Lonesome" area there were 1,362 acres of active prairie dog colonies and a combined 5,175 acres of colonies on the Kiowa/Rita Blanca NG when the colonies were last mapped in 2012.
- Rita Blanca SPV Study Site-2013 was the first year one of the sylvatic plague research project in Rita Blanca National Grassland units RB-22 and RB-77. The first year study concluded in October 2013. Samples were collected from 183 prairie dogs (100 in RB-22 and 83 in RB-77). The SPV study site was closed to prairie dog shooting through a closure order in the summer of 2013.
- Dusting-The Texas Wildlife Services crew dusted 653 acres of black-tailed prairie dog colonies on the Rita Blanca National Grassland in May, 2013 in support of black-tailed prairie dog colony expansion within the potential black-footed ferret release area.
- Public Meeting-The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Wildlife Services, and the U.S. Forest Service hosted a public meeting at the courthouse in Dalhart, Texas on June 20, 2013 to discuss the potential reintroduction of black-footed ferrets on the Rita Blanca National Grasslands.

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