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FINAL

STATE OF MONTANA

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

OCTOBER 1992

NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA
BLACK-FOOTED FERRET REINTRODUCTION

PLEASE RETURN

Authority: Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act (87-5-101-123).
Importation, Introduction, and Transportation of Wildlife (87-5-
701-721).
Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Title 75, Chapter 1, MCA.
Administrative Rules of Montana. 12.2.428 - 12.2.453.

Prepared By: Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in
cooperation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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I. PURPOSE AND NEED

A. PURPOSE: The purposes of the proposed action are:

1. to maintain the State of Montana's involvement and cooperation in the recovery of the endangered black-footed ferret (Mustela nigripes).
2. to develop and improve black-footed ferret reintroduction techniques, and
3. to use the experimental techniques developed to reintroduce and establish a free ranging, cooperatively managed wild population of black-footed ferrets in the North Central Montana Experimental Population Area near Malta, Montana.

The information gained from conducting this experimental action would be used to assist the national recovery effort for this endangered species, and help meet the objective of establishing 10 or more wild populations throughout its historic range by 2010 in order to downlist the species to threatened. The North Central Montana population may also serve as a source of donor animals to augment future reintroductions.

B. NEED: The black-footed ferret is an endangered species under both State of Montana and Federal law. It may be extinct in the wild in Montana. The U. S. Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act), directs Federal agencies to take action to recover endangered species. This includes reintroduction into unoccupied historical range. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is encouraged to cooperate with the receiving states.

The Montana Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1973 (87-5-101-123) directs the State to protect and manage endangered species found within the State in order to maintain and, to the extent possible, enhance their numbers.

The success of captive propagation efforts mandates the next major step for recovering the black-footed ferret is their re-establishment in the wild.

C. BACKGROUND: The black-footed ferret was listed as an endangered species in 1967 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and in 1975 by the State of Montana. The last known wild population near Meeteetsee, Wyoming, was devastated by canine distemper in 1985-1986. Eighteen surviving black-footed ferrets were taken into captivity in 1986-1987 to prevent extinction and to serve as founder animals in a captive propagation program aimed at eventually reintroducing the species into suitable habitat in the wild.

In 1988, the 1978 black-footed ferret recovery plan was revised to provide a more up-to-date blueprint for actions to recover the species. Among other changes, the species' recovery plan was updated as follows:

"To ensure immediate survival of the black-footed ferret by:

1. Increasing the captive population of black-footed ferrets to a census size of 200 breeding adults by 1991;
2. Establishing a pre-breeding census population of 1,500 free-ranging black-footed ferret breeding adults in 10 or more populations, with no fewer than 30 breeding adults in any population by the year 2010; and
3. Encouraging the widest possible distribution of reintroduced black-footed ferret populations."

The black-footed ferret will be downlisted from endangered to threatened status if these objectives are achieved (provided the extinction rate of established subpopulations remains at or below the rate that new subpopulations are established, for at least 5 years).

The black-footed ferret captive breeding program initiated in 1986 by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department has been very successful. The captive population has nearly doubled each year, increasing from 18 to approximately 420 animals in 1992. Since the captive population objective has been exceeded, the emphasis has shifted to reintroducing black-footed ferrets to the wild.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (Department) agreed to assist the recovery effort by attempting to re-establish two viable wild black-footed ferret populations separated by at least a 100 kilometers within the state.

The Department, in consultation with cooperating state and federal agencies and with affected landowners, prepared a Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction and Management Plan for the North Central Montana Complex (North Central Montana Working Group, 1992).

The Black-Footed Ferret Interstate Coordinating Committee recommended six potential black-footed ferret reintroduction sites in five states within the ferret's historic range. The first priority site for reintroduction was the Shirley Basin/Medicine Bow area in Wyoming. Black-footed ferret reintroductions occurred in that area in 1991. The North Central Montana Complex is one of four possible second sites.

D. NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA COMPLEX

1. **EXPERIMENTAL POPULATION AREA:** The North Central Montana Experimental Population Area (Experimental Population Area) lies between the Milk River on the north and the Missouri River on the south in Phillips and Blaine Counties. The eastern boundary is the Phillips/Valley County line and the west boundary follows the west edge of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation to the southwestern corner. It then extends south to the Missouri River along the

Phillips/Blaine County line (figure 1). Land ownership of the approximately 2,712,000 acres within the Experimental Population Area includes: 968,460 acres (36%) private; 767,320 acres (28%) Bureau of Land Management; 593,000 acres (22%) Fort Belknap Indian Reservation; 241,400 acres (9%) National Wildlife Refuges (228,520 acres CMR); 132,000 acres (5%) State; and 9,560 US Army Corps of Engineers.

All marked ferrets found in the wild within the Experimental Population Area prior to the first breeding season following the first releases will comprise the nonessential experimental population for this period. During and after the first breeding season following the first releases, all ferrets found in the wild in the Experimental Population Area will comprise the nonessential experimental population. Black-footed ferrets found outside the Experimental Population Area boundary will be classed as endangered and will be handled according to current policies. They will also be genetically tested to determine if they originated from the reintroduced stock.

2. REINTRODUCTION AREA: The black-footed ferret habitat (black-tailed prairie dog, Cynomys ludovicianus, colonies) within the Experimental Population Area was mapped using the "7Kilometer Rule" (7K) which was based on the observation that ferrets were capable of traveling at least 7 kilometers (4.3 miles) to another prairie dog town in one night (Biggins et al. 1989). The 1988 census identified approximately 26,000 acres of black-tailed prairie dog towns within the 7K boundary in south Phillips County outside of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. The 7K boundary was used to delineate the Reintroduction Area and will contain the Ferret Release Sites (figure 2). Most management practices and guidelines outlined in the Reintroduction and Management Plan will only apply within the Reintroduction Area.

3. FORT BELKNAP INDIAN RESERVATION: The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, which contained 20,907 acres of prairie dog towns in 1990, occurs within the

designated Experimental Population Area but is not included within the proposed Reintroduction Area. The Fort Belknap Community Council through tribal resolution opposes black-footed ferret reintroduction in or adjacent to Fort Belknap Reservation lands.

E. SCOPING: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) initiated efforts to identify and address concerns of local publics through the formation of a Prairie Dog/Black-Footed Ferret Coordinated Resources Management Planning Group as a part of the Judith, Valley and Phillips Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (JVP-RMP/EIS). During the period of July 15 to October 5, 1990, Department, BLM and Service, biologists made individual contacts with 53 ranchers having private land and/or BLM-administered grazing leases and permits within the proposed Reintroduction Area.

The main rancher concerns included: private property rights, prairie dog control, loss of grazing, cost of the reintroduction program, distrust of government, interference by individuals and groups from outside the area, and increased restrictions on their operations.

The Department released a draft Reintroduction and Management Plan in October 1991. Subsequent public informational meetings were held in Missoula, Fort Belknap, Malta, Billings and Miles City. A total of 241 written comments was received by the February 14, 1992 deadline. In addition, 156 completed forms that were produced and distributed by local landowners were also received. An analysis of the comments is contained in Appendix 1.

Fort Belknap Community Council concerns include: prairie dog control, loss of grazing, distrust of government, interference by individuals and/or groups from outside the area, and increased restrictions on management of, and operations on tribal lands.

II. ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

This chapter describes the Proposed Action and the No Action alternatives in detail. Other alternatives considered, but not studied in detail, are presented and reasons for their having been eliminated from detailed study are discussed. All alternatives discussed in detail conform with the BLM's draft JVP-RMP/EIS.

A. PROPOSED ACTION: BLACK-FOOTED FERRET REINTRODUCTION

(NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA NONESSENTIAL EXPERIMENTAL POPULATION)

The proposed action is the reintroduction of captive-raised black-footed ferrets (excess to the objectives of the captive endangered population) into the North Central Montana Reintroduction Area in 1993. The released ferrets would be designated a nonessential experimental population in accordance with Section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act, as amended. The nonessential designation, suggesting that loss of the experimental population will not reduce the likelihood of survival of the species, will be explained in the proposed rulemaking. Details of the reintroduction proposal were presented in the "North Central Montana Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction and Management Plan" prepared by the Department and the Service in cooperation with affected agencies and individuals. A summary of the major elements follows.

MINIMUM CRITERIA: Black-footed ferret reintroduction into South Phillips County would be reevaluated if any of the following occur:

1. The black-footed ferret habitat rating index ¹ (Biggins et al. 1989) falls below 50% of the 1988 level.

¹ An index based on abundance of prairie dogs which estimates the number of ferret families a prairie dog complex could support.

2. Failure to acquire or maintain a "nonessential experimental population" designation for the black-footed ferret reintroduction into south Phillips County.
3. Wild black-footed ferret populations are found within the North Central Montana Experimental Population Area prior to the first breeding season following the first reintroduction.
4. Active cases of canine distemper are diagnosed within the Reintroduction Area six months prior to release.
5. Fewer than 20 black-footed ferrets are available for the first reintroduction.
6. An appeal of the Prairie Dogs and Black-Footed Ferret Management issue in the BLM's JVP-RMP/EIS which results in changes in prairie dog allocations or impedes the implementation of the Reintroduction and Management Plan.
7. Funding is not available to implement this plan.

RELEASE PROTOCOL: If available, at least 20 black-footed ferrets, selected to be as genetically redundant as possible with the captive breeding population gene pool, will be released in the fall of 1993. All released animals will be marked. The exact number of animals to be turned loose and the release methods will be determined during the summer of 1993.

The initial reintroductions will test and evaluate at least two release techniques. The choice of techniques will be guided by results from the Wyoming trials and by the availability of resources and equipment. This experimental approach may entail considerable handling of the ferrets.

RELEASE SITES: Potential black-footed ferret release sites were identified and prioritized by the North Central Montana Working Group. This group recognized the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) a core area where many land use conflicts could be avoided. Therefore, the UL Bend area of the CMR was proposed as the primary release site. The abundance of prairie dogs and the relatively isolated location increased the acceptability of this site. A backup site, Manning Corral, also mostly on the CMR, will probably be dropped from consideration due to a decline in prairie dog numbers detected in 1992. A final determination for release sites will be made during the summer 1993.

PREDATOR CONTROL: Prior to release of black-footed ferrets and during the initial population establishment phase, it may be necessary to remove individuals of some species that may prey on the ferrets. These would include: coyotes (Canis latrans), red fox (Vulpes vulpes), badger (Taxidea taxus), and great-horned owls (Bubo virginianus). No long-term predator control program to benefit the reintroduced ferrets is planned.

DISEASE SAMPLING: Approximately forty each of coyotes, red fox and badgers would be collected prior to reintroduction of ferrets to determine canine distemper occurrence in the Reintroduction Area. Periodic sampling will provide information on any changes in the status of the disease. Released black-footed ferrets would be inoculated against canine distemper if a useable vaccine becomes available.

Information obtained during the 1992 field season suggested sylvatic plague may be present in the Reintroduction Area. Mammalian predators will be collected to test for the presence of this disease.

PRIVATE LAND: The Reintroduction and Management Plan would impose no restrictions on the use or management of private lands within the Experimental Population Area. Management actions will be implemented on private lands only

with landowner approval. Black-footed ferrets on private land in the Experimental Population Area will always be relocated if the affected landowner so chooses.

GRAZING: The grazing of domestic livestock was considered compatible with the reintroduction and management of black-footed ferrets. No animal unit months (AUM) reductions will be required to accommodate the ferret program. Livestock forage loss due to prairie dog habitat increases on BLM lands above the existing level (1988 survey) would be mitigated through land treatments (mechanical, fire, etc.).

PRAIRIE DOG CONTROL: The Reintroduction Area polygon included 26,000 acres of prairie dog towns of mixed ownership based on the 1988 survey. An attempt will be made to maintain, but not to exceed, this total acreage. Prairie dog management on private land would be at the discretion of the landowner. The BLM would maintain the 1988 prairie dog acreage on the land it administers within the Reintroduction Area. Loss of prairie dog habitat on private land may be compensated for by developing additional habitat on BLM lands in the vicinity of the habitat loss. Black-footed ferrets would not be released on BLM administered lands unless the prairie dog acreage surrounding the release site is at or below the 1988 survey level.

Prairie dog habitat within the Phillips County portion of CMR NWR would be maintained and allowed to increase where potential habitat exists in accordance with CMR policy. These increases may be used to offset prairie dog losses in the private sector of the Reintroduction Area. Prairie dog management on lands administered by the Montana Department of State Lands (MDSL) within the Reintroduction Area would be coordinated between the lessee, MDSL, and the Department.

Land management agencies and private landowners would determine, and pay for,

prairie dog control used on lands under their jurisdiction, unless other cooperative means and agreements are willingly implemented by the parties. Control methods include: Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) registered toxicants (e.g., zinc phosphide), shooting, and non-lethal control methods (e.g., barriers, mechanical land treatment, water development or grazing management). The Department would coordinate the prairie dog management programs, agendas and roles of the various agencies and individuals involved in the Reintroduction and Management Plan. A local Citizens Steering Committee would assist the Department with this task.

RECREATION: Special regulations or restrictions for the general hunting season would not be needed to facilitate the ferret reintroduction. Presently, means to restrict prairie dog shooting (except on National Wildlife Refuges) is very limited. Therefore, voluntary restrictions on prairie dog shooting during initial releases would be implemented and, if necessary, access to release site towns would be restricted. Most public trapping in the Reintroduction Area involves coyotes, red fox and badger. If a problem arises due to the incidental take of ferrets, the Department would develop voluntary guidelines in cooperation with the trappers. Access to the release sites may also be restricted to photographers and other recreationists.

ANIMAL DAMAGE CONTROL: Cooperation and coordination of Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, Animal Damage Control activities in the Reintroduction Area with the Department and the Service would be encouraged to minimize incidental black-footed ferret mortality. Animal Damage Control will assist with the collection of animals for disease sampling and in predator control on the release sites.

TAKE: The Service (US Fish and Wildlife Service) has determined that taking of a black-footed ferret in the North-Central Experimental Population Area excludes unavoidable, and unintentional take and any take that did not result

from conduct lacking reasonable due care. Taking also excludes natural mortality (predation), and manipulation necessary for scientific or educational purposes, relocation of any losses resulting from normal farming and ranching operations.

AGRICULTURAL CHEMICALS: There would be no restriction on the use of EPA registered chemicals in the Experimental Population Area except on National Wildlife Refuges.

If successful, the Proposed Action would result in an established, free-ranging, sustainable, population of 50 or more breeding age black-footed ferrets in the Reintroduction Area by a target date of 1997. This would be accomplished without negatively affecting the lifestyles and economies of the local communities.

B. NO ACTION: Under this alternative, black-footed ferrets would not be released in the Reintroduction Area and the Reintroduction and Management Plan would not be implemented. Prairie dog population monitoring would be reduced to periodic surveys. Collecting specimens to test for the presence of diseases, such as canine distemper and sylvatic plague, would not occur. Predator control activities associated with black-footed ferret reintroduction would not be conducted.

The Department would continue managing wildlife species in the Reintroduction Area in accordance with the hunting and trapping rules and regulations. The Service would not prepare and issue a rulemaking to designate a nonessential experimental black-footed ferret population in south Phillips County.

State and federal land management agencies would still be required to manage their lands in the Reintroduction Area as potential black-footed ferret habitat. The federal agencies would be required to formally consult with the

Service prior to conducting or permitting any actions in the area. The Service would be required to determine whether black-footed ferrets are present in the area and, if so, whether the proposed action would be likely to jeopardize them or their habitat. In addition, the federal prairie dog acres would be maintained as a potential release site.

Management of private lands would not be affected by this reintroduction proposal.

C. OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT STUDIED IN DETAIL:

1. Reintroduce black-footed ferrets into North Central Montana Complex as an endangered population.

Black-footed ferrets released into the Reintroduction Area could be designated an endangered population. The experimental population status provided as a management option by section 10(j) of the Act would not be invoked. However, the stringent protective requirements (ie. Section 7 and Section 9 of the Act) accompanying this alternative and the possibility the reintroduction site might be designated critical habitat in the future would result in more private landowner and public land user opposition. The Montana Black-footed Ferret Working Group decided the added protection was not necessary for a successful reintroduction.

2. Reintroduce black-footed ferrets into North Central Montana Complex as an essential experimental population.

The captive-bred black-footed ferrets establishing in the Reintroduction Area could be considered essential to the continued existence of the species in the wild and, therefore, should be designated an essential experimental population. The rationale for determining this population to be not essential was explained in the Reintroduction and Management Plan. The additional

restrictions and possible critical habitat designation accompanying this alternative would result in considerable opposition to the reintroduction proposal by local private landowners. The Working Group did not consider an essential designation to be necessary for a successful reintroduction.

3. Reintroduce black-footed ferrets only on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.

Biological entities and processes cannot be confined by artificial political boundaries. Therefore, this alternative was determined to be infeasible. The Reintroduction and Management Plan encouraged involvement and cooperation with the plan from all affected agencies and individuals. The plan recognizes the special role for the ferret habitat on the CMR but also recognizes the necessary contributions from other land management agencies and private individuals for a successful program.

4. Reintroduce black-footed ferrets as an essential experimental population on Federal Lands and as a nonessential experimental population in the remainder of the North Central Montana Complex.

This alternative would require more stringent Section 7 consultation between federal agencies and the Service (consultation with National Wildlife Refuges would not be affected). In addition, critical habitat could be designated on the Federal Lands. The result would be increased opposition to the reintroduction plan. Since this alternative would provide little additional protection to the reintroduced ferrets, it was rejected.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section describes the affected environment and evaluates the likely environmental consequences of implementing the No Action alternative and the Proposed Action alternative. Floodplains, wetlands, prime or unique farmlands, wilderness values, water quality, prime or sole sources of drinking water, wild and scenic rivers, Native American religious concerns, and areas of critical environmental concern are specifically protected by Federal law or regulation and would not be affected by the alternatives and are not evaluated. In addition, the alternatives would have no significant effect on regional climate, air quality, hydrology, soils, vegetation, forest management, fishery resources, visual resources, or local noise levels.

The alternatives could affect wildlife resources, paleontological and cultural resources, recreation management, mineral resources, range and livestock management, lands and realty management, and local socio-economic parameters.

The description of the affected environment and environmental consequences of implementing the alternatives will be restricted to the Reintroduction Area which is the core recovery area wherein habitat management and the majority of coordination with landowners, land managers, and land users would occur.

The area outside the Reintroduction Area but within the Experimental Population Area boundary is essentially a buffer zone. This zone, with the exception of the extensive prairie dog colonies on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, is considered incapable of supporting a long term viable population of ferrets. Black-footed ferrets dispersing into this zone retain the nonessential population status allowing agencies flexibility to manage/remove them at the request of the landowner or Tribal Council. Therefore, the reintroduction effort is unlikely to result in appreciable impacts in the buffer zone. Outside the Experimental Population Area ferrets

are an endangered species and would be captured or managed according to current policies. They would also be genetically tested to determine if they were from reintroduction stock.

The No Action alternative assumes the BLM would manage its lands in accordance with its JVP-RMP/EIS and the CMR would follow the guidance provided in the FEIS for the Management of Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. State and private landowners would continue to manage their lands under current law and policy. The impacts that are described for the Proposed Action alternative will be those that are different from, or incremental to, the No Action alternative.

A. BIOLOGICAL/ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES

1. THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

Affected Environment:

The following Federally listed threatened and endangered wildlife species may occur either in or near the Reintroduction Area:

- Black-footed ferret
- Bald eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus)
- Peregrine falcon (Falco peregrinus)
- Piping plover (Charadrius melodus)
- Interior Least tern (Sterna antillarum)
- Pallid sturgeon (Scaphirhynchus albus)

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: Taking no action to reintroduce the black-footed ferret into the Reintroduction Area would result in no new impacts to listed species currently in the area. These species would continue to be protected through Section 7

consultation. The decision not to reintroduce black-footed ferrets into the Reintroduction Area would negatively impact their recovery since the opportunity to test reintroduction techniques and to reestablish a free-ranging population of black-footed ferrets in this excellent habitat would not occur.

Proposed Action: The proposed action is likely to beneficially affect the black-footed ferret by establishing a population of 50 or more ferrets breeding in the wild. Due to the differences in habitat use and other factors, the proposed action would not adversely affect the other listed species (bald eagle, peregrine falcon, piping plover, interior least tern, and pallid sturgeon).

2. OTHER WILDLIFE SPECIES

Affected Environment:

Species lists compiled by Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge and the BLM indicate as many as 7 species of amphibians, 13 species of reptiles, 56 species of mammals and 246 species of birds may be found in the Experimental Population Area.

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: Taking no action to reintroduce the black-footed ferret into the Reintroduction Area would result in no additional impacts to these species.

Proposed Action: Reintroducing black-footed ferrets into the Reintroduction Area would result in additional predation on black-tailed prairie dogs. While this may result in short term declines on specific areas, the overall prairie dog population should not be significantly impacted.

The Management Plan calls for maintaining the ferret habitat in the Reintroduction Area at the 1988 level of 26,000 acres of prairie dog towns.

Therefore, wildlife species associated with prairie dog ecosystems (e.g., burrowing owl, golden eagle, prairie falcon, ferruginous hawk, mountain plover, swift fox, cottontail rabbit, and various rodents) would benefit secondarily from efforts to preserve their habitat.

The reintroduced black-footed ferrets would also be another prey species for larger predators. Predator control in the vicinity of the release sites is expected to reduce the numbers of coyotes, red foxes, badgers and possibly great horned owls immediately prior to and following the release of the ferrets. This may result in a slight increase in the rodent population, which could be offset by the reintroduction of a new predator. Existing predator populations are expected to reach pretreatment numbers via immigration and reproduction within six months after control measures are terminated. Permits for taking of great horned owls or other avian predators are required.

The removal of 40 coyotes, 40 red foxes, and 40 badgers for canine distemper testing will result in a reduction of these populations. Immigration and reproduction will ensure the declines in numbers are short lived.

While the reintroduced black-footed ferrets may prey on other small animals living in prairie dog towns, their impact on the total population of any single species should be minimal.

B. CULTURAL/PALEONTOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment:

The prehistoric period began around 14,000 years ago and ended around 1855, with the signing of the Blackfeet Stevens Treaty. The inhabitants of this area were mostly hunters and gatherers utilizing the natural resources (plants and animals) for subsistence activities. There are approximately 2,180 archaeological sites recorded in the Phillips Resource Area (USDI BLM, 1991). Starting about 1910 homesteading brought settlers into the Reintroduction Area

in significant numbers. By 1925, one out of every two homesteaders had lost or abandoned their farms.

Various paleontological resources occur within the Reintroduction Area. The most productive deposit is the Hell Creek Formation which contains abundant fossils of terrestrial dinosaurs. These formations are exposed along the Missouri River Trench (USDI BLM, 1991).

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: No impacts to cultural/paleontological resources would occur if no action is taken to reintroduce black-footed ferrets into the area.

Proposed Action: If black-footed ferrets were reintroduced, some minor surface disturbing activities may be undertaken to house or support them during the reintroduction process. If surface disturbing activities occur, pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), as amended, and its implementing regulations (36 CFR 800), and on-the-ground pedestrian survey and inventory would be required for the purposes of locating and evaluating cultural resources. Compliance with Section 106 of NHPA and the Archaeological Resource Protection Act of 1979 would also be required. The Service will assume the responsibility to conduct needed surveys and inventories. Assistance with surveys would be solicited from the BLM's Phillips Resource Area Archaeologist.

Cultural/paleontological resources found at a site on public land shall be reported to the BLM and the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). If the discovery is made on private land, the landowner shall be notified. In either event, the proposed surface disturbing activity would be relocated to a site in which surveys reveal no significant cultural/paleontological resources. Hence, no impacts to cultural/paleontological resources would result from the proposed action.

C. RECREATION

Affected Environment:

Dispersed recreational activities such as, big and small game hunting, nongame hunting (prairie dogs, cottontails and jackrabbits), trapping, fishing, off-road vehicle (ORV) recreation, sight-seeing, and wildlife viewing, occur throughout the Reintroduction Area.

Big game hunting in the Reintroduction Area involves both archery and rifle hunting for antelope, mule deer, white-tailed deer and elk. Small game pursued include upland game birds and waterfowl. Approximately eight outfitters are authorized to operate hunting camps in the Reintroduction Area.

Prairie dog shooting is common and is an important source of revenue to the local communities (1200 hunter days/year on BLM lands).

Trapping furbearers and predators and aerial gunning predators for their furs occurs throughout the Reintroduction Area. The intensity of these activities is dictated by the price received for the furs. Fur prices have been depressed in recent years which resulted in a reduced harvest.

Off-road vehicle (ORV) use would be limited to existing roads and trails on 166,720 acres of BLM administered land in the Reintroduction Area during the hunting season (September 1 to December 1) (USDI BLM, 1991). ORV use is limited to designated roads on the CMR and is controlled by the landowner on private land.

Special recreation management areas/facilities occurring in the Reintroduction Area include the BLM operated Montana Gulch and Camp Creek campgrounds.

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: No change in the existing situation would occur.

Proposed Action: No significant impacts to existing uses are likely to occur. Costs associated with trapping could increase because of the increased travel required to reach trap sites to avoid black-footed ferret release sites. Guidelines or special regulations may be applied by the Department in cooperation with trappers if problems arise.

Prairie dog shooting would be voluntarily restricted on the release site towns and if necessary access to release site towns could be restricted. The restrictions would be lifted as the ferret population becomes established and any conflicts are resolved. Estimates of the potential of the area to support ferrets (Carlson, 1989) indicate that shooting did not affect the potential of this area to support 50 plus black-footed ferrets.

Special regulations or restrictions during the general hunting season will not be required to facilitate the ferret reintroduction.

D. MINERAL RESOURCES

Affected Environment:

Historically, most oil and gas exploration/development in the Experimental Population Area has been for natural gas. A small portion of the Bowdoin Dome gas producing field underlies the northern edge of the Experimental Population Area. No producing wells currently occur in the Reintroduction Area.

Oil and gas development on the CMR is allowed only when necessary to prevent depletion of Federal oil and gas resources by adjacent development. Surface disturbing activities on prairie dog towns within the Reintroduction Area on the CMR would not be allowed.

Coal development has been limited to numerous small mines in the early 1900's near the Zortman Gold Mining District. Mining claims within the Experimental Population Area include silver, gold and diamond/garnet claims in the Little

Rocky Mountains and bentonite claims in south Phillips County. Large scale hardrock mining of gold and silver in the Little Rocky Mountains resumed in 1979. Open-pit mining of bentonite deposits located south of Malta occurred from 1978 to 1986. If bentonite mining resumed, the Reintroduction Area could experience from 50 to 100 acres of surface disturbance.

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: No change in the existing situation would occur.

Proposed Action: The Reintroduction Area's 26,000 acres of black-footed ferret habitat (prairie dog towns) occurs outside existing gas fields. Therefore, the proposed action should not interfere with production from existing gas fields.

Leasing of oil and gas resources on public lands within the Experimental Population Area would continue. The BLM would protect approximately 12,300 acres of prairie dog towns identified as potential habitat for black-footed ferrets with a Controlled Surface Use stipulation on future oil and gas leases. This stipulation could be waived, excepted or modified on prairie dog towns not identified for black-footed ferret reintroduction in accordance with the, "Draft Guidelines for Oil and Gas Activities in Prairie Dog Ecosystems Managed for Black-footed Ferret Recovery, FWS, 1990".

Oil and gas development on CMR is allowed only when necessary to prevent depletion of Federal oil and gas resources by adjacent development. Surface disturbing activities on prairie dog towns within the Reintroduction Area on CMR would not be allowed.

Black-footed ferret habitat occurs outside of the known recoverable coal areas. No impacts to coal development are expected.

The proposed action may cause restrictions to be imposed in the unlikely event that bentonite mining were resumed in the Reintroduction Area. Hardrock mineral resources do not overlap with prairie dog colonies within the Experimental Population Area, consequently no impacts to these resources are anticipated.

E. LIVESTOCK GRAZING/RANCHING

Affected Environment:

Nearly all lands in the Reintroduction Area are grazed by livestock. The primary domestic species grazed is cattle, but numbers of sheep and horses also use the area.

A total of 60 BLM grazing allotments occurs in the Reintroduction Area.

Nine grazing permits are administered on lands within the Reintroduction Area on the CMR.

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: No change in the existing situation would occur.

Proposed Action: Black-footed ferret reintroduction would not supersede or reduce the right of private landowners to manage their own property. In addition, the nonessential experimental designation for the reintroduced ferrets would allow their removal from private lands at the landowners request. Therefore, the proposed action should have no impact on the management of private lands with the Reintroduction Area.

The BLM will maintain approximately 12,300 acres of prairie dog towns on lands under its control within the Reintroduction Area. In addition, private land prairie dog acreage losses may be made up on adjacent BLM lands. Any loss of livestock forage due to prairie dog habitat increases on BLM above the 1988

survey level would be mitigated through land treatments (mechanical, fire, etc.). There will be no loss of AUMs on BLM administered lands as a result of the proposed action. Therefore, the proposed action should have minimal impact on BLM grazing lessees.

All prairie dog towns within the Reintroduction Area on CMR would be maintained and prairie dog towns will be allowed to increase where potential habitat exists in accordance with existing CMR policy. These increases may be used to offset any losses on private land. Should prairie dog acreage on CMR decrease, management activities to enhance their habitat on the refuge would occur. The proposed action should have minimal impacts on CMR grazing lessees.

A policy change concerning prairie dogs on lands administered by the Montana Department of State Lands (MDSL) has been implemented. Prairie dog management on State lands within the Reintroduction Area will require coordination between the lessee, MDSL and the Department to ensure the objectives of the Management Plan are met. This may reduce the lessees prairie dog control costs. On the other hand, the lessee may experience some livestock forage loss.

Livestock predator control by the APHIS Animal Damage Control would not be affected by the proposed action. Therefore, increased costs for predator control are not anticipated.

F. RIGHTS-OF-WAY/REALTY ACTIONS

Affected Environment:

Numerous rights-of-ways on private and public lands in the Reintroduction Area have been issued for various utility and transportation purposes (communication sites, oil and gas pipelines and water related facilities such as reservoirs, dams, ditches, canals, dikes, wells and water pipelines). BLM

maintains approximately 135 miles of roads in the Phillips Resource Area. No designated rights-of-way corridors occur in the Reintroduction Area.

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: No change in the existing situation would occur.

Proposed Action: On private and State trust lands, decisions on rights-of-way would reside with the private landowner or the MDSL. The Service and the Department would provide advisory recommendations to avoid or minimize negative impacts to ferrets or ferret habitat. Nuisance prairie dogs could be controlled and rights-of-way for various activities would continue to be authorized on private and State trust lands.

Applicants for a right-of-way on public lands would be contacted by the BLM early in the right-of-way application process and encouraged to avoid prairie dog towns. Rights-of-way on public land requiring significant surface disturbance may be lengthened and/or rerouted to avoid prairie dog towns occupied by black-footed ferrets. Increases in rights-of-way lengths would increase construction and maintenance costs. In cases where projects cannot avoid prairie dog towns, the Service and/or Department would determine if ferrets occur in the area. Recommended mitigative measures would be provided to the BLM and the applicant. These measures should not preclude the intended activity in the Reintroduction Area.

Increased construction costs would be incurred where new powerline rights-of-way cross public land containing prairie dog towns due to the placement of raptor deterrent devices.

G. LOCAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC PARAMETERS

Affected Environment:

The Reintroduction Area is considered rural with a population density of about

one person per square mile in Phillips County. In 1990, Phillips County had a population of 5,163 people and an area of 3,345,920 acres. Food, medical and financial services are located in Malta, the county seat, which has a population of 2,340. The residents of the county exhibit attitudes and values typical of the western United States with the rural character of the area highly valued in their lifestyle. Livestock grazing, small grain farming and recreation represent the major land uses and provide stability to the economy of the county.

Environmental Consequences:

No Action: No change to existing socio-economic conditions would occur under the no action alternative.

Proposed Action: The intent of the Reintroduction and Management Plan was to maximize the chances for a successful black-footed ferret reintroduction while minimizing the negative impacts on the local economies and life styles. Every effort was made to solicit input from affected individuals and to address their concerns in the plan. To strengthen their involvement, a local Steering Committee was formed to assist the Department in meeting the goals and objectives of the plan.

The farming, livestock and recreation economic bases of the county should not be impacted by the proposed action.

Revenues from recreation may be decreased if prairie dog shooting is discouraged or curtailed. This may be partially off-set by increased tourist traffic due to the presence of black-footed ferrets.

The local commercial businesses should receive an economic boost from an influx of State and Federal personnel associated with the reintroduction project.

IV. IRREVERSIBLE AND IRRETRIEVABLE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES

A. Under the No Action Alternative:

If black-footed ferrets are not reintroduced into the North Central Montana Reintroduction Area, ferret recovery in Montana would be delayed until another suitable site became available. A decision not to use this site could negatively affect the long-term conservation of the black-footed ferret to an undetermined degree.

B. Under the Proposed Action Alternative:

Black-footed ferret mortalities from natural environmental conditions, the testing of experimental reintroduction procedures, and incidental take would be expected while they establish a free-ranging population in the Reintroduction Area.

The establishment of a free-ranging breeding population of black-footed ferrets in the Reintroduction Area would significantly reduce the probability of the ferret becoming extinct in the wild.

Oil, gas and mineral exploration and/or extraction operations might have to use slightly more costly techniques.

Trapping costs may increase or trapping techniques may be modified to avoid incidentally/accidentally taking ferrets.

Some rights-of-way might have to be lengthened and/or rerouted on public lands to avoid a taking of black-footed ferrets on occupied prairie dog towns. This increases construction costs at an undetermined level.

New Powerlines on public lands would be constructed to avoid prairie dog colonies and raptor deterrent devices would be recommended which could increase the costs of construction.

The region would receive greater, but undetermined, revenues from the influx of State and Federal personnel involved in the reintroduction program and from contracts with individuals involved in the black-footed recovery effort. The region would also receive greater, but undetermined, revenues from additional tourism activities associated with black-footed ferrets.

C. Short-term v. long-term productivity:

There would be no residual adverse impacts under the Proposed Action and the short term effects of the Proposed Action would not affect the long term productivity of the area.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION WITH OTHERS

The Montana Black-Footed Ferret Working Group first introduced the concept of ferret recovery to the general public at an open meeting in southern Phillips County in 1985. The BLM subsequently initiated efforts to identify and address concerns of local publics through the formation of a Prairie Dog/Black-Footed Ferret Coordinated Resources Management Planning Group (CRMP) as a part of the ongoing Judith, Valley and Phillips Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (JVP-RMP/EIS). Additionally, during the period of July 15 to October 5, 1990, individual contacts were made with 53 ranchers having private land and/or BLM administered grazing leases within the proposed Reintroduction Area. Information regarding the JVP-RMP/EIS process and the black-footed ferret reintroduction proposal was provided the ranchers by Department, BLM and Service biologists.

Public informational meetings on the Draft Reintroduction and Management Plan were held in late 1991 in the following Montana cities, Missoula (December 2), Malta (December 9), Fort Belknap (December 10), Billings (December 11) and Miles City (December 12). The Department received a total of 241 written comments on the draft by the February 14, 1992 deadline. In addition, 156 completed forms that were produced and distributed by local landowners were also received. An analysis of the comments is contained in Appendix 1.

VI. LITERATURE CITED

- Biggins, D., B. Miller, B. Oakleaf, A. Farmer, R. Crete, and A. Dood. 1989. A system for evaluating black-footed ferret habitat. Report Prepared for the Black-Footed Ferret Interstate Coordinating Committee. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Fort Collins, CO. 25 pp.
- Carlson, J. 1989. North-central Montana: Biological evaluation for potential black-footed ferret reintroduction. Unpubl. Rept. for the Montana Black-Footed Ferret Working Group and Black-Footed Ferret Interstate Coordinating Committee. USFWS, Helena, MT. 9 pp.
- North Central Montana Working Group. 1991. North Central Montana Black-Footed Ferret Reintroduction and Management Plan. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 61 pp.
- USDI, Bureau of Land Management. 1991. Judith-Valley-Phillips Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. July 1991 Draft. USDI BLM Billings, Montana. 429 pp.