

# **Budget ills endanger rare ferrets**

## **A recovery program ``on the brink of greatness'' is heading toward collapse as funding remains flat.**

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Section: 1A SECTION

Page: A-01

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's **black-footed ferret** recovery program is facing a serious budget crunch that could undo more than two decades of work to rescue the most endangered mammal on the continent.

Ferret funding increased 4 percent to \$491,000 for 2005, the latest in a string of essentially flat budgets, leaving the program unable to maintain operations, federal officials said.

The shortfall will force the layoffs of two of the three technicians responsible for the day-to-

day care of the captive ferret population.

While the service still intends to release about 200 of the masked weasels this year, releases slated for next year may be suspended, said ferret recovery coordinator Mike Lockhart.

The budget also will complicate the move of the breeding program this fall from Sybille, Wyo., to a new \$8 million facility in Carr, Colo., northeast of Fort Collins.

"We're on the brink of greatness with this program," said Bill Van Pelt, nongame program manager with the Arizona Department of Game and Fish. "This is really devastating at this juncture."

Poisoning, the conversion of prairie to farm fields and disease led to the ferret becoming one of the first animals protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

At its low point, the ferret population had dwindled to just 18 animals in captivity. Since then, more than 2,000 animals have been released into the wild.

Last fall, biologists estimated there were 450 to 600 ferrets in the wild. The weasels face high mortality because of disease and predation.

The program pioneered the widely used technique of capturing rare, wild species for captive breeding. The federal breeding center is the largest and most important of six such facilities in the country. The five other breeding programs are run out of private zoos, Van Pelt said.

"We have the technical expertise and capability to recover the species," Lockhart said Monday. "There's no doubt about that."

Some of the region's endangered-species money has been redirected to the wolf and

grizzly-bear recovery efforts - two big predators whose management the Bush administration wants to turn back to Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

"The nation's wildlife agency is being starved to death," said Steve Torbit, regional director of the National Wildlife Federation. "It's an avoidable tragedy."

With the staff cuts, ferret care and prairie-dog quarantines - critical to avoiding the introduction of diseases such as plague and distemper - will suffer, Lockhart said.

The travel budget also has been eliminated.

"Such a setback could have immediate and enormous

ripple-down impacts that could tilt the balance away from species recovery," Lockhart wrote in a June 2 memo.

Other aspects of the Mountain-Prairie Region's ecological services division also have felt the budget bite. Travel for the rest of the division's 200 employees has been suspended through at least October, and work on pollution and endangered-species consultations will be limited, said Assistant Regional Director Mary Henry.

Endangered-species consultations are mandatory whenever a federal, state or local project requiring a federal permit is likely to jeopardize a listed species or harm its habitat. Such projects include road construction, bridge repair, timber harvesting and ski-resort expansions.

The budget bottleneck may delay efforts to downlist the ferret from endangered to threatened, which could happen by 2010 if the goal of having 10 populations with 1,500 animals is reached.

"We've been plugging away for last 20 years and made significant progress," Van Pelt said. "But because we're not a squeaky wheel, we don't get the budget we need to drive this car home."

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