COVID-19 Impacts to Black-footed Ferret Recovery Efforts

Updated – April 6, 2020

If you have questions, concerns, edits, etc., please contact Pete Gober, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, BFF Recovery Coordinator (720-626-5260).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) National Black-footed Ferret (BFF) Conservation Center (NBFFCC) is one of six managed care/captive breeding facilities that work to ensure survival of this endangered species through the Species Survival Program. NBFFCC houses two-thirds of the world’s captive population with the other third shared among the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, Louisville Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, and the Toronto Zoo. Many other partners participate in BFF recovery efforts in the field.

Please see below specific information on how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect the BFF captive populations and an update on the actions being taken by BFF recovery program partners in the field.

Why worry about COVID-19 and the BFF?

It is likely that BFFs are highly susceptible to COVID-19 based on their known susceptibility to human influenza and the susceptibility of domestic ferrets to SARS CoV1 and the novel SARS CoV2 (the virus that causes COVID 19). Due to this susceptibility, domestic ferrets are currently being used for developing and testing potential human vaccines for COVID-19.

Should the virus that causes COVID-19 be introduced into BFF populations, it could potentially cause widespread illness and BFF deaths, especially in the managed care facilities. An abundance of caution is recommended to guard against BFF population impacts due to COVID-19 exposure.

What is being done to protect the BFF?

Current Recommendations for Managed Care Breeding Facilities (MCBF) include the following:

- Participate in regular joint conference calls to discuss implementation of new husbandry procedures/protocols to prevent and minimize the COVID-19 threat
- Eliminate non-essential contact and exposure of BFFs (i.e., no tours, visitors, volunteers, etc.)
- Increase infection control through:
  - Proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE) for husbandry duties, including dedicated scrubs, footwear, disposable gloves & masks
  - Frequent hand washing and disinfection of all touched surfaces
  - Protection and/or disinfection of all items in contact with BFFs
  - Use of accelerated hydrogen peroxide as cage disinfectant
- Change husbandry schedules to limit the BFF exposure to multiple staff and limit staff-to-staff contact. Only essential staff allowed in breeding buildings.
o Require staff to self-monitor their temperature and overall health and report known contact with infected individuals. These recommendations are the best precautions for staff to guard against COVID-19 exposure to BFFs since it has been reported that >25% of infected people have no symptoms or very mild symptoms without fever.

Specific changes at NBFFCC include the following:
  o Dividing BFF population into smaller groups to limit risk of infection (separate buildings)
  o Limiting the number of staff responsible for each BFF group
  o Establishing a dedicated infirmary for COVID-19 suspect BFFs where enhanced PPE (e.g. powered air purifying respirators) will be worn by personnel caring for these animals.
  o Early testing of COVID-19 suspect BFFs, in coordination with the U.S. Geological Survey’s National Wildlife Health Center.
  o Adapting protocols, as necessary, to meet husbandry demands or in the case of disease outbreak.

Current Recommendations for Partners working at BFF Reintroduction Sites include the following:
  o Eliminate non-essential contact and exposure of BFFs (i.e., no routine trapping, etc.)
  o Increase infection control through :
    • Proper use of PPE for essential duties, including disposable gloves & masks
    • Frequent hand washing and disinfection of all touched surfaces
    • Protection and/or disinfection of all items in contact with BFFs
    • Use of accelerated hydrogen peroxide or another approved product as trap/reader disinfectant
  o Staff experiencing symptoms or with known exposure should not participate in field work at release sites

In closing, it is important to emphasize how serious COVID-19 could be for the BFF captive populations and the overall BFF recovery program. All partners and staff are committed to combining efforts and resources to minimize the impact of this disease on BFF recovery. This fact sheet will be updated regularly and made available on blackfootedferret.org.