Any questions, additions, or corrections may be directed to Pete Gober, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), BFF Recovery Coordinator (720-626-5260), pete.gober@fws.gov.

Background

The USFWS National BFF Conservation Center (BFF Center) is one of six managed care/captive breeding facilities that work cooperatively to ensure the survival of this endangered species. USFWS provides oversight for the five BFF Partner institutions affiliated with the American Zoos and Aquariums Association BFF Species Survival Program. The BFF Center houses about 170 BFF adults or two-thirds of the world’s captive breeding population with the other one-third distributed among the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Louisville Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, and the Toronto Zoo. Many other BFF Partners participate in BFF recovery efforts in the wild (30 sites in 10 western states), including Mexico and Canada.

The information below addresses how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect BFF populations and the responses considered by BFF Partners involved in recovery efforts both in captivity and in the wild.

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 domestic ferrets’ susceptibility, they are being used for developing and testing potential human vaccines and treatments for COVID-19.

COVID-19 presence in the BFF managed care/captive facilities could potentially cause widespread illness and BFF deaths. Accordingly, increased animal husbandry precautions have been initiated to limit potential exposure.

What is being done to protect BFFS?

Current Recommendations for BFF Partners of managed care/captive BFF facilities:

- BFF Center staff will participate in regular conference calls with all BFF managed care facilities to discuss implementation of new husbandry procedures/protocols to prevent and minimize the COVID-19 threat.
- The BFF Center will eliminate non-essential human exposure to BFFS (i.e., no tours, visitors, volunteers, etc.).
- The BFF Center will consider COVID-19 infection pathways from human to human, from human to animal, from animal to animal, and from animal to human.
o BFF Center staff will self-monitor their temperature and overall health, and report any known contact with infected or suspected individuals. These recommendations are the best precautions 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.

o The BFF Center will increase infection control through:
  • Use of additional 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; and
  • Use of accelerated hydrogen peroxide as cage disinfectant.

o The number of individual staff responsible for each BFF subpopulation has been limited as much as possible.

o The BFF Center will change husbandry schedules to limit BFF exposure to multiple staff and limit staff-to-staff contact. Only essential staff will enter buildings with BFFs.

o An increased number of smaller BFF subpopulations have been placed in smaller groups to limit the risks of overall infection (separate rooms or buildings). Seven subpopulations of approximately 25 individuals each have replaced the longstanding convention of the BFF Center population divided equally between four rooms in one building.

o If any BFFs show COVID-19 symptoms the BFF Center will try to get animals tested.

o A dedicated infirmary space for COVID-19 suspect BFFs has been established. Enhanced PPE (e.g. powered air purifying respirators) will be used by personnel caring for any affected BFFs.

o There will be daily reevaluation of all procedures.

Current Recommendations for BFF Partners working at BFF Reintroduction Sites:

o COVID-19 exposure by humans to BFFS in the wild could also be problematic. Staff experiencing symptoms or with known exposure should not participate in field work at release sites.

o Assess value of management effort vs. COVID-19 infection risk; coordinate site plan specifics with USFWS.

o Limit potential COVID-19 exposure to BFFs (i.e., limited or no routine trapping, etc.).

o Increase infection control through:
  • Proper use of PPE, including disposable gloves & masks;
  • Frequent hand washing and disinfection of all touched surfaces;
  • Protection and/or disinfection of all items in contact with BFFs; and
  • Use of accelerated hydrogen peroxide or another approved product as trap/reader disinfectant.

This BFF COVID-19 update will be revised periodically and posted on www.blackfootedferret.org.