

January 7, 2008

Memorandum To: Mike Stempel, ARD, Fisheries and Ecological Services, Denver, CO

From: Mike Lockhart, former Black-footed Ferret Recovery Coordinator,
NBFCC, Laramie, WY

Subject: Thanks, and an outgoing appraisal of ES, R6.

Following my retirement, I wanted to thank you one last time for your support of the black-footed ferret program over this past year.

I have had a long and fulfilling career with the Service and I'm retiring with mixed emotions and some disappointment over events of the past few years and especially the last couple of months. The Service is not the same, and the changes are not improvements. Consequently, I wanted to provide some personal perspective on the state of R-6, and R-6 ES in particular.

I believe these are pertinent views and as such will share them broadly with R-6 administrators, ES coworkers, and select BFF work associates. I am providing this note only via Email.

From the time I was a freshman in high school, my only focused career pursuit was the FWS. I had become something of a raptor nut and took up falconry in high school and through college. In 1967, I wrote to the D.C. office to inquire about work the Service was conducting on golden eagles and got a wonderful response from Erv Boeker, a fine FWS research/pilot biologist out of the Denver Wildlife Research Center. In 1972, Erv took me under his wing, designated me as a banding subpermittee, and left me on my own to explore techniques for trapping and marking migrant golden eagles in W. Texas. I went on to do both undergraduate and graduate work on golden eagles in Texas. And later, in 1975, I got my first job with FWS (an emergency hire) to assist in the capture of depredating golden eagles on the Helle-Rebish ranches in SW Montana. After two previous years of largely fruitless attempts to trap eagles, 1975 efforts on the Helle-Rebish ranches were highly successful and opened the door to a job with the FWS DWRC in fall of 1975.

Since that time, I have enjoyed a wonderful career with the Service and have served as a Research Biologist studying the effects of surface mining on resident birds of prey in the northern Great Plains; as an energy biologist working in western Colorado; conducted contaminant assays on free-ranging bald and golden eagles; I was the first biologist to work directly on what is now the Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR and worked closely with Pete Gober and others to develop programs that ultimately led to the founding of the Refuge; was responsible for oversight of the bald eagle response activities associated with Exxon Valdez clean-up operations in 1991 and 1992; took a position with the Service's Alaska Subsistence Program during initial development and served as both the FWS liaison to the Alaska Board of Game and Branch Chief for the advisory board system; I returned to Colorado to take the management lead position for the wildlife/contaminant section of the RMA NWR; and finally, took a position in 1996 with the Service's black-footed ferret program and served as the BFF Recovery Coordinator for my final 8 years with the Service.

Over the years, I've also had opportunities to provide both official and volunteer assistance to numerous individuals, universities, agencies, States and other countries engaged in wildlife conservation and endangered species recovery, and on specific research projects involving bald and golden eagles, other raptors, polar bears, and other carnivores.

I have worked under both Area Office and Regional Office organizational structures, but predominantly in a field setting. And similar to most FWS field biologists, I feel that I always threw myself fully into every job I've undertaken and worked without regard for extra hours, weekends, or whatever was required. Although undoubtedly not as strong in areas of office administration, I have other strengths and capabilities that I believe have served the FWS well and have led to tangible accomplishments and resource gains. I have worked on many controversial issues and with divergent, often polarized groups. I believe I have decent communication and mediation skills that principally led to problem solutions rather than confrontation. Finally, I pride myself on being open, forthright, and objective in all my personal and professional dealings, both within FWS and with all other contacts and opposing interests. I suggest my work history shows that I work well with people, but always with resource conservation and mandated responsibilities foremost in consideration.

I bring this history up not for the purposes of self promotion, but to suggest that I have sound experience in dealing with trust responsibilities and people, and under a variety of FWS organizational structures and supervisors. And I have to say, that in over 32 years with FWS, I have never experienced such poor supervisory support and direction as I have out of our R-6 ES office over the last 4+ years.

As you know, the BFF recovery program is large, complex, and often controversial and involves a substantial partnership of agency, tribal, NGO and private parties across the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and involves several States in R-2. I assumed the Coordinator responsibilities in 2000, at a time when the Service had only been managing the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center (NBFFCC) for five years.

At that time, our program oversaw international captive breeding efforts and activities for 8 reintroduction projects. However, since 2000, responsibilities for captive breeding (and associated prairie dog acquisition/quarantine) increased substantially, the number of reintroduction projects doubled, and we went through a difficult and multi-year planning and construction process for a new breeding facility near Wellington, CO. All that has occurred despite the fact that staffing levels to support NBFFCC operations diminished when our office broke away from the South Dakota Field Office in 2000.

In short, program responsibilities dramatically expanded, yet we have remained severely understaffed for the level of work needed to address the wide range of recovery tasks.

Our office contains exceptionally capable and dedicated staff responsible for the day-to-day management of the captive breeding program. However, for field recovery responsibilities (reintroduction projects, land use management plans, partner coordination, ferret allocations, site and habitat assessments, working group meetings, etc.), equally important in terms of promoting eventual BFF recovery, the only fully dedicated staff member (until recent months) was me. And I have done my utmost to achieve my primary job responsibilities: "fostering species recovery in the wild.

Those efforts have been accomplished without any substantive support, guidance, or recognition by recent supervisors. The operations and work of the NBFFCC over the past 4+ years were essentially independent of the RO and day-to-day workload and program priorities were set internally.

Neither a past ARD nor DARD displayed specific interest in the ferret recovery program. Despite repeated efforts to engage these supervisors early on, our office was visited only once by the ARD and only twice by the DARD in perhaps the last 5 years. Outside of two (possibly 3) Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team (BFFRIT) annual meetings, neither individual participated in program management assessments, project reviews (e.g. the 2003 CBSG evaluation), any pivotal land use/habitat meetings, or other critically important recovery planning efforts.

Consequently, it is extremely disappointing and frustrating to have a RO supervisor characterize my personal performance this year (a milestone year actually) as inferior, and be critical of decisions I made to avoid a potentially fatal threat to years of work accomplished on a BFFRIT recovery plan revision; and, for being outspoken about the potential impacts of a FS land use planning effort on our most successful and important ferret recovery site (Conata Basin, SD). Those not actively engaged in ongoing operations and decision processes for such a complex program have no basis, and no right, for making critical assessments of work accomplishments. That alone demonstrates how ridiculous the current performance system has become.

I deeply resent that appraisal! It was not only an unjust and petty representation of what I've helped accomplish this year, but was a poor way of ushering a long-serving staff member out the door. But in truth, I don't really care what my past supervisor thinks of me or my performance; I don't have much respect for someone who makes poor assessments from such a detached position. I'm proud of my work, both past and present. I know what I have invested in my job, how far the recovery program has come, and what my true peers and work associates really think!

I bring this up because it is symptomatic of problems within R-6 and likely the Service in general. Over the majority of my tenure with the Service, the RD, DRD, other RO staff, and Field supervisors and biologists seemed to work together more closely to address FWS resource responsibilities, and open dialog and alternative views were welcomed and weighed.

Much of that seems to have been lost over the past several years. It started even before Mitch King became RD and undoubtedly reflects the nature of the top-down management approach of the current Administration. However, Mitch King enormously exacerbated these problems and was the most destructive and irresponsible RD I have ever experienced. The arrogance and recklessness with which Mitch made unilateral decisions affecting the black-footed ferret program have caused major, perhaps irreversible impacts to some BFF recovery sites and may impact our ability to promote recovery projects on other federal public lands. Mitch never consulted our office before making decisions/commitments to other agencies, States, or politicians, and never attempted to develop a realistic understanding of the limitations and needs of the recovery program. Mitch totally ignored our concerns and input, while taking the word of others outside the Service who provided twisted and incorrect facts and logic.

I hope Mr. Guertin, Jay, and all who share in the responsibility of administering FWS resource responsibilities in R-6 will take a more direct and cooperative course in working with field biologists, will largely defer conservation direction to the expertise that exists in Field Offices, and will better deflect outside political pressures that threaten FWS resource responsibilities. I also hope the RO will be more careful about how regional supervisors for field offices are chosen, and be more thorough in the review of how those supervisors oversee programs in their charge! It is a travesty to place regional supervisors in such important positions when they have limited experience and/or interest in the activities and responsibilities of those offices they supervise!

The RO's primary focus, at all levels of administration, including the RD, DRD, FR-ES, Refuges, HR, Engineering, CGS (boy, are there severe support problems here!), etc., should be to support field operations and the management, conservation, and recovery of plant and wildlife species at ground level. That kind of support is largely absent now, and it appears that the Field instead serves at the "beck and call" of the RO and DC, and responds to unending and questionable data reporting requests, training, and last minute deadlines. Coupled with decreasing budgets and staff, these tactics appears to be a calculated move to diminish attention to fundamental responsibilities!

Finally, I wish to comment on the Service's administration of the black-footed ferret recovery program itself. And, I need to point out to others who may read this letter, that my frustrations expressed herein are not directed at you, Mike. I sincerely appreciate your immediate assistance and the righting of several wrongs that our program was experiencing at the time you assumed responsibility for both the Fisheries and ES programs last year. You have been an enthusiastic and thoughtful supporter of the ferret program and you have helped develop a new organizational structure and support increased staffing that will promote continued progress. I have great confidence in you, Henry Maddux, and Pete Gober.

But, at every step of FWS involvement in the recent political fray over Conata Basin (since 2004), the RO facilitated Forest Service efforts to limit discussion and perspective on the consequences of the planning and proposed actions for the Nebraska National Grassland land use revision.

The Service had previously maintained a consistent position on the importance of Conata Basin and for expanding BFF recovery efforts over other National Grasslands since the late 1990s. However, my responsibilities and input as recovery coordinator on this issue were largely circumvented by RO staff in recent years. And although I understand that you, Jay and others were put in an awkward position by Mitch, attempts to negotiate varying compromises in "caps" of prairie dog habitats were wrong and still can, if implemented, seriously impact overall ferret recovery. It remains to be seen what the FS will eventually do, but I take some comfort in the fact that political pressures from other outside interests may have finally swayed the FS and that they realize the folly of drastic alterations of prairie dog numbers in Conata Basin.

The Service should have never supported efforts to satisfy a ridiculous position brought about by the State of SD and a careless Forest Supervisor.

The FS did an outstanding job of developing the Conata Basin site in the first place (starting in 1996), and if they choose to succumb to political pressures and compromise the integrity of our best recovery area, the Service should not willingly go along for the ride. Besides reversing many years of progress and throwing away hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process, the credibility of the FWS would be severely damaged. Conata Basin was (is) indeed a sword FWS should be willing to fall on! Please do not compromise what has been accomplished at Conata Basin, and please take every opportunity to reinforce plans for expanding recovery projects over other FS and BLM public lands across the species range, wherever possible.

I regret leaving FWS at this time. I loved my career, and I have many good years ahead of me. I will remain active in wildlife conservation work and would have preferred to continue with FWS, perhaps by seeking a transfer.

However, personal life changes tie me solidly to Wyoming and I was not willing to continue work under the frustrations of the past few years and under the same line of supervision. I will be

following the progress of the BFF recovery program with great interest and hope, and am willing to assist the Service through volunteer work whenever and wherever possible.

Finally, I wanted to ensure that others reading this letter understand that my personal frustrations are limited in scope and do not reflect my overall opinion of Service staff. To be sure, the considerable success of the ferret recovery program was possible only through the hard work and dedication of many involved cooperators and other FWS biologists and administrative staff at the NBFCC, several field offices, and the RO itself. I deeply appreciate the direct and behind-the-scenes support I received from those many people. I especially appreciate the tremendous help provided by Pete Gober and his office over the years.

Best wishes to all!

Mike Lockhart