

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

<http://www.dfg.ca.gov>

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December, 2, 2010

Ms. Legenda Landis
Cuddlynanna06@att.net

Dear Ms. Landis:

The Director asked me to respond to your recent letter regarding domestic ferrets in California. California's laws restrict importation and possession of domestic ferrets and many other animals in order to protect our public health and safety, agriculture, wildlife, and natural resources. The Department of Food and Agriculture and the Department of Health Services, are required to protect these interests. California's restrictions apply to many kinds of wild and domestic animals that are legal pets elsewhere, including hedgehogs, gerbils, degus, prairie dogs, sugar gliders, fur-ranch foxes, monkeys, and Quaker parakeets.

Domestic ferrets are not native to California and were included by the Legislature on the prohibited species list in 1933. At that time, the Fish and Game Commission (Commission) was given authority to implement the law. Since then, the Commission has set the rules for permitting people to possess ferrets for certain purposes, such as scientific and medical research, education, and transportation out of state. Domestic ferrets may not be imported or possessed in California, except under a permit issued by the Department. Only the Commission may authorize the Department to issue such permits, following a public hearing. However, no permits are being approved for possession of ferrets as pets in California.

The Department has long opposed the legalization of ferrets in our State because ferrets are capable of surviving in our environment if they were to get loose or be released by their owners. Ferrets are carnivores and are hunters by nature. In the wild, they prey on birds, waterfowl, reptiles, frogs, rodents, and small livestock, including poultry and rabbits. Domestic ferrets have not lost their hunting instinct; in fact, for hundreds of years they have been used for hunting game animals. Domestic ferrets are used in some countries for rodent and rabbit control. Keeping ferrets as pets is a recent development.

There are many examples from places around the world with climates similar to that of California where domestic ferrets have managed to survive and breed. Escaped or abandoned ferrets are often captured by animal control agencies and humane societies in California. Many pet ferrets do hunt, either because they are used by their owners for hunting or because they are experienced at killing pest mice, rats, or small pets that they find indoors. Such experienced hunters would have a good chance of surviving in the wild and

harming wildlife. Domestic ferrets have formed breeding populations in the wild in many parts of the world, including the state of Washington. Non-breeding domestic ferrets have been found surviving in the wild even in wintertime in southeastern Alaska. Even a sterilized feral ferret surviving in the wild could harm wildlife.

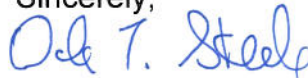
Any decision to legalize ferrets as pets in this State rests either with the Commission or the State Legislature. The Commission has received a number of requests from ferret proponents to legalize ferrets in our State. A recent request was in April 2000, and in response, the Commission explained that state law requires an environmental review before it could make a determination whether to remove restrictions on possession of ferrets as pets, because that would entail a regulation change. The Commission indicated that it would be the responsibility of proponents to fund an environmental document. The Department is aware of the recent report by Dr. Graening to summarize information on domesticated ferrets and potential impacts on the environment. It was my understanding that this report might be used by ferret proponents to proceed with the preparation of an environmental impact report for the Fish and Game Commission. I don't know the status of any such effort at this point.

There have been several ferret legalization bills over the past decade. Legislative bills must be passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor. The latest, Senate Bill 89 (Alpert) would have allowed amnesty for ferrets already in the State. Our Department was opposed to the bill because it proposed to legalize ferrets prior to the completion of an environmental document, and it would have required the Department to undertake a complicated and unenforceable ferret licensing program. That bill was vetoed by the Governor in 2004.

California's unique ecosystems are practically unparalleled in the United States. Like our neighbor to the west, Hawaii, which similarly prohibits ferrets and is also home to many threatened and endangered species, California is aggressively attempting to protect these treasures.

We appreciate hearing your views and concerns. I hope this information will help you understand the issues and concerns about legalizing ferrets as pets in California. If you have any questions I can be reached at (916) 445-0803.

Sincerely,



Dale T. Steele, Program Manager
Wildlife Species Conservation Program