

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

Ferret

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Domestic Ferret Issues In California



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Introduction

The following information draws upon a wide array of publications and other information sources, with emphasis on articles available on the Internet. The main purpose of this web site is to direct readers to online information sources that pertain to the issues raised over pet ferret legalization in California. These include articles on the nature of the ferret, on the status of ferrets in the wild, on the issues of non-native species introductions in general and of introductions of small carnivores like the ferret in particular, and on native wildlife resources at risk in California.

California animal importation restrictions exist to protect not only these wildlife resources, but also the State's agricultural interests, the public's health and safety, the wild populations of imported species, and the welfare of imported animals, themselves. Those aspects are included here, as well.

Much of the following material is presented as quoted passages from articles that are available on the Internet. Text that is not italicized and in quotes has been prepared by the compiler. Quoted passages from the online references are presented as they appear on web sites, including any grammatical errors. Spelling errors are noted by "(sic)". To read quoted passages in context with the source web article, click on the appropriate hypertext link, which is included either as part of a quote or its reference source, and use the "Find" function of your browser to search for key words or sentence fragments contained in the quoted passages.

Background

The domestic ferret, the domesticated variety of the European polecat, has been used for centuries in Europe by hunters to chase rabbits out of burrows and to kill rodent pests. Originally, ferrets were imported into the United States in the 19th century for such uses. In the 20th century, ferrets were bred for their fur and used in medical laboratories. Promotion of ferrets as a pet animal began in the 1970s.

The ferret is a predator that is closely related to weasels. Another related species is the now-endangered black-footed ferret of the North America Great Plains. The domestic ferret, together with the polecats, is

classified in the biological family Mustelidae, the group that also includes nine carnivore species that are native to California, including the ermine, mink, badger, and otters.

In California, domestic ferrets are legal to import, transport, or possess only by permit. Permits are issued for specific purposes, such as for medical research or for transportation of confiscated ferrets or rescued stray ones out of state. Importation and possession of ferrets as pets are not permitted in California. Many of the states in the U.S. that allow ferrets as pets do so under permits or certain restrictions.

Since the mid 1980s, ferret organizations have promoted legalization of ferrets as pets in the states that had prohibited such ownership. Eight states legalized ferrets as pets since then: Alaska in 1985, Pennsylvania in 1987, Vermont in 1989, Georgia in 1991, New Hampshire and Utah in 1993, Michigan in 1994, and Massachusetts in 1996. Only California and Hawaii prohibit importation and possession of ferrets as pets.

In the mid 1990s, and again in 2000, pet ferret advocates attempted to convince the California Fish and Game Commission in public hearings to adopt regulation changes to legalize ferrets as pets. In 1996, Marshall Farms, Inc. of New York, the nation's largest ferret breeder, brought suit against the Commission regarding its statutory responsibilities in this matter. Also, in recent years, ferret organizations have been pursuing ferret legalization in the California legislature. From 1994 to 1999, four such bills were introduced.

Protection of California's wildlife resources is one of the important subject areas being addressed in the ferret legalization process. A great deal of information has been written about ferret biology, diseases, and predation in relation to wildlife conservation. To make that knowledge more readily available, California Department of Fish and Game contracted with the University of California, Davis, to compile an annotated bibliography of pertinent published references, including technical articles. The bibliography was published in 1997 and is available [online](#). The bibliography and other information from a variety of sources, mainly online articles, have been used in preparing this overview of ferret issues.

Department of Fish and Game surveyed state wildlife agencies in 1996-97 for information on agency authority and other legal background, ferret classification and terminology, status of ferrets owned or wild, and environmental concerns. A summary report of this survey is available [online](#).

The compilation of the bibliography and the survey of states were originally undertaken to obtain background information for an environmental document, which would have been used by the California Fish and Game Commission in assessing environmental concerns, had the Commission considered a 1995 request for legalization of ferrets as pets. The Commission in 1996, with the advice of counsel did not take action on the request, so an environmental document was not initiated. However, these documents would provide useful information for an environmental assessment, if one were to be required as a result of future legislative, legal, or Commission actions. The Commission in April 2000, upon again receiving a request for ferret legalization, directed the proponents of legalization to fund the preparation of an environmental document before the Commission would consider the request further.