

**Independent Designated Observer Pilot Program**  
**FINAL REPORT**  
**October 2010**

**Overview**

One of the American Horse Protection Association's ("AHPA") missions is the protection and preservation of America's wild horses and burros on US public rangelands. The Bureau of Land Management's ("BLM") has the authority and responsibility to ensure, to its best ability, the welfare of wild horses and burros during the gather, holding, and transporting process when horses are removed from public rangeland.

In line with BLM's ongoing development of its animal welfare program, in June 2010, AHPA offered to initiate a Pilot Independent Designated Observer Program ("Pilot Program") that involved the observation and reporting on the care and handling of wild horses and burros during the gather process at three major summer gathers: Owyhee HMA (NV); Stinking Waters HMA (OR); and Twin Peaks HMA (CA). ***It is important to note that the Pilot Program was not intended to replace public observation days. Additionally, the Pilot Program was specific to the care and handling of the animals only. BLM policy regarding removals was not within the scope of the Pilot Program.***

AHPA engaged four independent credentialed professionals who are academia-based equine veterinarians or equine specialists: Camie Heleski, Ph.D., from Michigan University; Betsy Greene, Ph.D., from the University of Vermont; Sarah Ralston, VMD, Ph.D., from Rutgers University, and Carolyn Stull, Ph.D., from University of California at Davis. Several of the above individuals were instrumental in writing the horse chapter of the Guide for the Care and Use of Agricultural Animals in Teaching and Research, published by the Federation of Animal Science Societies.

Each observer served on a team of two, and was tasked specifically to observe the care and handling of the animals for a 3-4 day period during the gather process, and submit their findings to AHPA. An Evaluation Checklist was provided to each of the observers which included four sections: Gather Activities; Horse Handling During Gather; Horse Description; and Temporary Holding Facility.

Each team was accompanied by a designated BLM employee to each gather, and was introduced to BLM personnel, APHIS veterinarians, and contractor employees present on site as independent observers in attendance to observe the care and handling of animals only. Team members were given access to the trap site and corrals, and observed in a quiet and unobtrusive manner minimizing any interference or impact on the process, interacting with BLM personnel, APHIS veterinarians and employees of the Cattoor Livestock Roundup, Inc. (the contractor for all three gathers) as needed. Overall, team members were well received. BLM, APHIS, and the contractor were open and informative with information about the gather process, procedures, veterinary treatment, and answered any questions asked. The contractor and its employees did

not restrict access and discussed methods of care and handling of animals and answered questions freely.

### **Observations and Findings**

**General:** While the Pilot Program included gathers in three different HMAs with unique geographic considerations and employing separate ground personnel, the following observations were recurrent among the three gathers:

- Although it was evident that there was a variety of expertise among handlers, generally, crews (contractor and BLM personnel) appeared to be gentle and knowledgeable, used acceptable methods for moving horses forward as endorsed by Temple Grandin, and were skilled with the balance point and flight zone of the animals.
- Chutes and pens were set up in a manner that reflected recommended handling practices for reducing animal stress in trap facilities, with the site located on a normal travel path of the animals and the opening shaped in a “V” using jute to mask the entry chute.
- Horses were sorted appropriately: mature stallions, juvenile stallions, dry mares, mares with foals, plus pens for injured or sick animals and orphan foals at the temporary holding facilities.
- Generally, horses did not exhibit undue stress or show signs of extreme sweating or duress due to the helicopter portion of the gather, maintaining a trot or canter gait only as they entered the wings of the trap. Rather horses showed more anxiety once they were closed in the pens in close quarters; however, given time to settle, most of the horses engaged in normal behavior with few vocalizations, few agonistic encounters or breeding-oriented behavior.
- Excessive activity from public observers and increased BLM personnel generating noise and distraction near the proximity of the trap site and along the pathway of movement resulted in repeated attempts to move animals into the trap area, and increased the distance travelled by horses. Likewise, vehicles parked near the area surrounding the trap site were visible to the horses and hampered their willingness to approach the trap.
- Overall, body condition score (BCS) based on the Henneke Body Condition Scale, ranged from 4-7. Lowest BCS was 3-1/2 for lactating mares.
- Horses were assessed by APHIS veterinarians to be capable of travel before transport to BLM holding facility as well as to evaluate/treat all injuries.
- APHIS veterinarians were open and candid regarding treatment protocol including the scenario which occurred at the Owyhee gather involving water toxemia and resulting in a number of deaths. In case of euthanasia or injuries, there was no attempt to minimize or hide any information or details related to the injuries or euthanasia procedures.

- When faced with unexpected and extraordinary circumstances (e.g., water toxemia at the Owyhee gather) BLM, APHIS, and the contractor demonstrated the ability to review, assess and adapt procedures to ensure the care and well being of the animals to the best of their ability.

**Gather Activities:** Team members were asked to briefly describe activities at the gather site and temporary holding facilities, including the role of authorized personnel present, description of the facilities, equipment and vehicles utilized in the gather.

The following are observations relating to gather activities:

- The helicopter's precision was favorably noted, and compared to a dog working sheep. It was reasonably quiet – no louder than riding lawn mower, and stayed quite distance from herd driving them down to the trap sites and utilized space well. The only time the helicopter got close was when it was pushing the animals toward the final section of the trap.
- Chutes and pens set up in a manner that resembled Temple Grandin's recommendation for reducing animal stress in holding facilities, with the site located on a normal travel path of the animals and the opening shaped in a "V" using jute to mask the entry chute.
- Horses travelled an average of 5-7 miles to trap site, and a Judas (or Prada) horse was utilized. Most horses entered the trap at a trot, some at a canter.
- APHIS veterinarians were on site to attend to any injuries and to monitor condition of horses. The team members arrived after the Tuscarora portion of Owyhee HMA but were briefed by APHIS veterinarians.
- Contractors and BLM personnel separately kept lists on horses moving through chute, noting sex, color, injuries, and whether a mare was lactating or with a foal, etc.
- At the Owyhee gather, the contractor set up a temporary, smaller scale trap about an hour's drive from primary gather site to adapt to group of horses likely in serious water deprivation.
- The 50-56 foot straight-deck trailers and stock trailers used to transport horses appeared to be well maintained and appropriate for task. Solid-sided roughed surface step ramp used for loading onto the straight-deck trailers.
- At the Twin Peaks gather, the presence of a large number of the public generated excess activity and noise. Combined with an increased number of vehicles parked near the trap site, this impacted the contractor's ability to successfully move animals to the corrals and increased the amount of distance the horses travelled.
- At the Owyhee gather, several changes in procedure were incorporated to decrease the potential for future water toxemia issues, such as allowing horses access to smaller

amount of water prior to access to water tanks. It was observed to be an effective way to take edge off their thirst and to prevent horses from diving into water troughs. Such changes had a direct impact on the health of the horses and once implemented resulted in a decrease in mortality and body condition.

- After a portion of the Owyhee gather was completed, team members flew over segments of the Owyhee HMA, the Little Humboldt HMA, and the Rock Creek HMA to survey conditions from the air and saw only a few horses in the Owyhee HMA but did see dried up reservoirs. Observed several dozen wild horses in the other two HMAs in small bands, and flew over the site where several horses had been found dead due to dehydration near multiple openings in the fenced areas.

**Horse Handling During Gather:** Team members were asked to describe and evaluate the helicopters used in the gathers; the use of handling aids; abusive or inappropriate handling of horses; injury to horses; and the sorting and loading procedures.

The following are observations relating to horse handling during the gathers:

- In general, the overall handling of the horses followed acceptable equine husbandry practices, and personnel demonstrated knowledge in moving horses in a quiet and effective manner.
- The few times the crew used their hands or handling aids (e.g., plastic bag on end of whip) directly on a horse was when the horse braced up against the back gate, refusing to move, and this handling was not deemed to be excessive.
- Horses being loaded into trailers were handled fairly quietly and reasonably, utilizing visual and noise stimulations from waving flags or whips w/plastic bags and the occasional use of noise paddles to move horses forward. Stallions were loaded first, dry mares second, wet mares third, and foals were separated in the rear of the trailers. No handling aids were used to load horses in to stock trailer – horses were loaded willingly.
- For purposes of loading and shipping, wet (lactating) mares were temporarily separated from foals to prevent injuries, and were reunited upon arrival at temporary holding facilities. Although there was mare and foal vocalization during this process, no extreme displays of behavior (e.g., gate crashing) were witnessed. Temporary separation of mare and foal in this situation is a preventative to limit injury of the animals.
- Wet mares and foals were transported to BLM holding facilities as early in the day as possible to minimize the time they are apart and also to minimize heat stress to more vulnerable groups.
- At the Stinking Water gather, a 23 year old stallion jumped out of the pen and escaped the trap site. About ½ mile from trap, he was subsequently roped and his legs were tied while in a recumbent position, and eventually was transported in a two compartment stock horse trailer back to the Burns Corrals.

- There were a number of additional horses that were roped and hogtied at the Stinking Water gather without injury, and one small young foal was ground roped from a pen to quickly remove it from mature horses without incidence.

**Horse Description:** Team members were asked to describe the general condition of the horses. The following are observations relating to horse description:

- Overall, body condition score (BCS) based on the Henneke Body Condition Scale, ranged from 4-7. A few lactating mares at the Owyhee gather scored a 3.5, and one horse at the Stinking Water gather scored an 8.
- At the Owyhee gather, horses were observed to be tucked up suggesting decreased water intake. Some foals had mud on their faces, suggesting they had been trying to suck water because their dams were not producing sufficient milk, and willingly drank water from a bucket which is uncommon and implies tremendous thirst.
- Hoof condition was generally good with no significant defects. One foal at the Stinking Water gather had noticeable chipping in one hoof but was not lame.
- Coat/hide condition was generally good and clean, and indicative of the summer season.
- Lameness: One mare at the Bull Flats temporary holding facility (Twin Peaks gather) was grade 3 lame at the trot, with no visible lesions. At the Litchfield short term holding facility two foals were observed to be stiff and foot sore but mobile. One stallion at the Owyhee gather came in lame with an old knee injury.
- Injuries: One mare with pre-existing injury to hind leg at the Twin Peaks gather; superficial scrapes/kick wounds and one ~4 inch laceration which was sutured by the APHIS veterinarian in the squeeze chute at the Stinking Water gather; cuts and scrapes were noted at the Owyhee gather and were most often treated with a furazone type product.
- Illness: A few horses exhibited colicky signs at the Owyhee gather; one mare was observed to have symptoms of rhabdomyolysis at the Stinking Water gather.
- Generally, horses did not exhibit undue stress or show signs of extreme sweating or duress due to the helicopter portion of the gather, maintaining a trot or canter gait. At the Stinking Water gather, two horses (a stallion and mare) that had eluded initial capture were sweaty and breathing rapidly but both recovered within 30 minutes. Rather horses showed more anxiety once they were closed in the pens in close quarters; however, given time to settle, most of the horses engaged in normal behavior with few vocalizations, few agonistic encounters or breeding-oriented behavior.

- There was minimal fighting among stallions (when mares were not present) especially when there were 4 or more stallions in a pen, except for “meet and greet” sessions with some normal posturing behavior. There was occasional kicking among the mares.
- Mortalities: At the Owyhee gather, there were two accidental injuries resulting in death: 1) A 6 yr old black stud had hit his head the previous day dislocating a cervical vertebrae (subsequent necropsy also showed heavy infestation of bots and strongyles); and 2) a grey mare ran into panel and was treated with banamine and IV dexamethasone to give her a chance to recover, however, she showed no response or improvement and was subsequently euthanatized by gunshot. At the Stinking Water gather, a 14 year old stallion with numerous pre-existing injuries and blind in one eye was deemed to be dangerous and unadoptable and was euthanatized by gunshot.
- APHIS veterinarian was forthcoming in apprising team members of treatment protocol and decision to euthanize. Team members moved away for safety reasons and respect for what the veterinarian needed to do.

**Temporary Holding Facility:** Team members were asked to describe the design and function of the holding facilities; the sorting of the animals in the pens; horse behavior in the enclosures; availability of water and forage; transport vehicles and the loading and unloading procedures.

The following are observations relating to the temporary holding facilities:

- Although there was a variety of expertise among handlers, generally, crews (contractor and BLM personnel) appeared to be gentle and knowledgeable, skilled with the balance point and flight zone of the animals, and used acceptable methods for moving horses forward as endorsed by Temple Grandin.
- Holding pens are set up with as few corners as possible and are composed of sturdy gates, and the vast majority of panels have snow fence (both orange and black, the color of which did not seem to matter) or jute mesh covering them.
- Pens and chutes were watered down to reduce the amount of dust and footing was good.
- Water was provided in multiple troughs and electrolytes provided as needed. At the Owyhee gather, it was observed that few horses appeared to drink from the tanks, although foals were active drinkers implying thirst. They were limited to ½ bucket to avoid colic/water toxicity.
- Hay appeared to be a good quality grass/legume and is distributed around the outer edges of the round pens to facilitate access to all of the horses in the pen.
- Upon arrival at the temporary holding site, horses were sorted by running them individually through a squeeze chute where they were aged by looking at their teeth using two sticks to pry open their lips, and their gender was also documented. At the Stinking Water gather, lactating mares were identified with spray paint on their hip or torso.

- Horses were placed in pens according to their gender and appeared to have enough space to move about in. Separate pens were provided for horses needed to be watched (young or orphaned foals, horses acting colicky, old or weak horses).
- Some groups of horses were agitated when approached for behavioral observations; however, others remained calm and unfettered.
- Foals observed nursing; reasonably content but some mares appeared somewhat agitated with kick threats. Many had battle scars but arrived with them.
- Mares and newly separated foals showed some distress (increased vocalization and locomotion); however, once mares were separated out the foals were observed drinking from water troughs.
- Some vocalizations among mares and foals upon pairing up again, and senior stallions calling to mares and vice versa. Once foals were reunited with their dams they resumed nursing.
- When in groups, horses seemed to be less anxious. Horses moving through the chutes one at a time exhibited more anxiety as they experienced a change in the footing and sounds and lost the comfort level of moving as a group.
- It appeared to be difficult to get the first horse through the narrow gates, and as horses moved through the chutes in single file, there was increased agitation with horses kicking at gates or other horses with both hind feet and with vigor. Other horses tried to climb out of the chute resulting in a few injuries, mostly cuts and scrapes.
- At the Twin Peaks gather, horses were transported from the Rodeo Flats trap site to the Bull Flats temporary holding facility, and then again to the Litchfield Corrals resulting in the potential of increased stress associated with repeated loading and unloading.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the observations of the independent designated observers, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- If at all possible, horses should not be roped or tied down in a recumbent position for prolonged periods of time, especially coinciding with exhaustive or over-heated conditions. Strict criteria should be established to determine the initiation and purpose of this practice. If necessary to implement these procedures, these horses should be identified, marked, and/or confined separately from the others in the gather and observed for any injuries or metabolic conditions for the next 48 hours. This could be achieved by moving these animals to designated, smaller holding corrals.

- Excessively aggressive horses (studs or mares) should be isolated as soon as possible or grouped with horses they were with before capture (i.e., a harem stallion with his foals or dry mares) rather than stand waiting in the chutes or alleyways.
- More of an effort should be made to ensure that horses enter the sorting chute face forward and that if a 'lead' horse gets stuck the primary effort should be made to get it to move forward rather than encouraging the horses behind it to move on top of the first horse. As an alternative, the back gate of the single file alley should be opened, allowing the horse(s) to exit the alley, and re-orient the horse forwards to the chute rather than aggressively try to back it in the chute or make it turn around.
- Another suggestion is to make the chute progressively darker (tighter woven snow fence over the course of several dozen feet) which would still allow an advance chance to determine gender of the animals.
- Consider widening gate areas leading to chutes/alley to afford more than one horse to move on. Work more slowly even in 'rescue' scenarios.
- Thick padding should be placed on the rails above the gates (overhead).
- The height of the outside fence panels of the temporary holding facility for the stud pens should be raised from 6 feet to 7 feet to discourage rearing or jumping over and sustaining possible injuries.
- Railings where horses will be herded past should be kept free of all hanging items such as jackets or other apparel to avoid spooking the animals.
- Short term holding facilities with wire fencing (e.g., Litchfield) should be transitioned to steel rail livestock panels to improve safety and security factors for fencing.
- All corrals should remain free from trash and baling twine to prevent digestive tract problems as well as injury resulting in entangling twine.
- Horses held in any enclosure over 4 hours after the gather at the trap site should be provided with access to hay and water in at least 100 gallon containers unless the horses are seriously dehydrated or compromised and, in the opinion of a veterinarian, should have restricted access to reduce the risk of water intoxication.
- Lidocaine spray (or other topical anesthetic) should be utilized by attending veterinarians in order to facilitate suturing of wounds in horses in the squeeze chute.
- Transport (unloading and loading) of animals should be kept to a minimum. For example, when distance is similar and road conditions provide for better transport horses should be transported from the trap site directly to short term holding rather than temporary.



- Public observers and increased BLM personnel should be limited in the number, activity and proximity to the trap site in order not to hinder the least resistant pathway of movement and minimize the distance travelled of the horses into the trap area necessary for a successful gather.
- Prohibit parked vehicles in direct sight of horses moving toward the trap site and corrals.
- Consider instituting a lottery system to limit the number of public observers in order to ensure that distractions to horses being gathered to allow for the safe handling of the animals as they move toward the trap site and corrals.
- Consider installing camera monitors in the chutes/corrals at short term holding facilities or trap sites for the public to observe gathering, loading, unloading and preparation of animals. The public could watch at the short term holding facilities and not be additionally stressful to the animals.
- Consider mounting a wide-angle lens camera on the helicopter during gather to record movement and behavior of the horses to study the effects of the helicopter on the horses.

## **Conclusion**

The observations and recommendations contained in this report are offered in good faith and as part of AHPA's ongoing dialogue with BLM to ensure that the care and well being of the animals in the wild horse and burro program is a top priority. While not all recommendations may be practicable to the operation, AHPA respectfully requests that BLM review each recommendation and if deemed to be not feasible, to address the reasons why.

Utilizing academia-based equine veterinarians and equine specialists as independent designated observers provides science based, hands-on documentation concerning the care and handling of horses during the gather process, and can be used to both validate existing practices and identify areas in need of improvement. By engaging accredited professionals within the horse industry, BLM is able to tap the knowledge of those specifically trained in horse behavior and equine veterinary medicine and incorporate industry practices into its policies and procedures. As stated at the onset, while the Pilot Program in no way takes the place of public observation, it serves as an assessment tool for the care and handling practices used in the wild horse and burro program, and opens the door to further science-based evaluation of the program.

Team members are considering submitting an abstract for subsequent publication to the Equine Science Society on their observations at the three gathers. Publication would be advantageous to BLM in that it authenticates the findings of the independent designated observer pilot program and would be helpful in the ongoing development of its animal welfare program.