

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is the official name for this gather?

A. 2019 Challis HMA Wild Horse Gather

Q. Why is this gather necessary?

A. The wild horse gather is necessary to prevent undue or unnecessary degradation of the public lands associated with excess wild horses, and to restore a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship on public lands, consistent with the provisions of Section 1333(b) of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act.

Forage is allocated for 185 horses or 2,220 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) in the Challis Herd Management Area (CHMA). Monitoring data indicate that when the total horse population begins to reach the upper limit of 253 animals (3,036 AUMs), resource conditions begin to decline, especially in riparian areas. Winter Range is the limiting factor for the CHMA, so AUMs are based on available forage in winter.

Q. How many horses will be gathered and how many will be removed from the range?

A. The BLM will gather approximately 365 wild horses and remove approximately 244 excess wild horses from in and around the Challis HMA, located in Custer County, directly south and west of Challis, Idaho.

Q. What will the remaining herd population of this complex be?

A. It is estimated that following the gather, approximately 185 wild horses will remain in the Challis HMA.

Q. How many horses will be released back to the range during this gather operation?

A. Approximately 121 of the captured wild horses would be released; of these, about 40 to 50 would be mares treated with fertility control and about 73 would be stallions or geldings to maintain the proposed 60% male/40% female sex ratio and slow population growth. Stallion characteristics selected for release will maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and body type (conformation).

Q. When was the last time that AML was achieved in this HMA?

A. The last time AML was achieved was in a helicopter gather in October 2012, when 267 horses were captured, 150 horses were removed, and 117 horses were released back into the CHMA. There were 47 mares treated with the fertility control vaccine PZP-22 prior to being released.

Q. Will BLM re-treat horses originally treated with fertility control in 2012?

A. Forty-seven mares treated with PZP-22 were released following the 2012 gather; it is possible that some of those chosen for release could be mares that had originally been treated in 2012.

Q. What are the horses from the Challis HMA like? What should I expect if I adopt one?

A. Feedback received by the BLM about adopted Challis horses has been positive. Historically, the HMA was made up of Percherons, Belgians, Shires and a mix of light breeds. These wild horses are descendants of domestic horses released into the wild in the 1800s and early 1900s. For many years, local residents captured the wild horses and bred them with a variety of stock. Presently, the Challis wild horses are a mixture of draft (primarily Percheron) and American Saddle types. This lineage explains the

significant number of gray horses in the herd, although there are a variety of colors, including buckskin, sorrel, appaloosa, pinto and bay. Adult horses in the Challis wild horse herd weigh an average of 1,000 pounds and stand between 14.2 and 15.2 hands, with some individuals weighing over 1,200 pounds. The herd is generally healthy, with good genetic diversity. Herd size has varied over the years, primarily as a result of horses being gathered from the range.

Oral history provided by local ranchers and submitted in a court document dated April 15, 1980 (Thomas, 1980), stated that Morgan mares escaped from a ranch and were never recaptured, while other Morgans were released with no attempt made to recapture them. James Bennett's grandfather released good stallions on the range, gathering the offspring each year. Some good saddle horses were also lost and never recovered. Tom Chivers stated that his grandfather ran range mares that were then bred to Shire and Belgian stallions (imported from England), as well as light saddle horses and coach horses.

Lawrence Bradbury's grandfather had two or three French Coach Stallions he turned loose on the range to breed horses for stagecoaches. Pat Lynch raised both saddle and draft horses, letting the mares run on the range, then gathering the young draft horses as 3-year-olds to halter break, and then gathering them again as 5-year-olds to sell as teams. Joe Anderson raised saddle stock and catered to the Cavalry remount program, which added Thoroughbred genetics. One outstanding Thoroughbred or Standardbred stallion named Bally Hall was turned out on the range between 1910-1915. Kenneth Bradshaw's father, who was a freight driver, raised Percheron and Belgian horses for his teams, pasturing many of his horses on the range. Bradshaw also remembered that some good American Saddlers and Hambletonians were later added to the range herds (Thomas 1980).



Wild horses in the Challis HMA.

Q. Are there livestock grazing in this area?

A. Yes. Cattle grazing occurs on 88% of the CHMA; there are six cow/calf grazing allotments within the CHMA currently under deferred or deferred/rest rotation grazing systems with use periods of spring, summer and fall. Warm Springs, Mountain Springs, Road Creek, Split Hoof, Bradbury Flat and Bradshaw Basin are allotments within the CHMA. The pastures within these allotments are relatively large and allow for a broad range of movement while livestock are present. In 2018, 59% of the allotted AUMs in the CHMA were used. Conversely, 41% of the available AUMs in the CHMA were either not authorized by the CFO or voluntarily rested by the permittees for various reasons such as rangeland resource conservation, resource protection, and to provide forage for wild horses and wildlife. The number of wild horses is determined by available winter range when livestock do not graze.

Q. Is the BLM removing horses to make room for more cattle grazing?

A. No. The BLM carries out removal of wild horses and burros from public rangelands to ensure rangeland and animal health, in accordance with land use plans developed in an open, public process. These land use plans are the means by which the BLM carries out its core mission, which is to manage the land for multiple uses while protecting the land's resources. Authorized livestock grazing on BLM-administered lands has declined by nearly 50% since the 1940s; actual (as distinguished from authorized) livestock grazing on public rangelands has declined by 30% since 1971.

Q. Does the wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?

A. Yes, wild horse overpopulation impacts wildlife and plants. Common wildlife species within the Challis HMA include coyote, black-tail jackrabbit, desert cottontail, bobcat, and numerous raptors, reptiles and other small mammal species. Mule deer, elk and pronghorn antelope are common big game species in the area.

The Land Use Plan (LUP) allocated forage for different multiple uses, such as wild horses and wildlife. However, when one of those uses— horses in this case—exceeds the population levels and the forage allocated in the LUP, additional impacts to wild horses and other species occur. What our data have shown is that when wild horse populations exceed the high AML of 253, additional utilization and trampling impacts occur in upland and riparian areas, which are also habitat to several wildlife species (fish, elk, Sage-grouse, etc.). Winter is a limiting factor for wild horses in the Challis HMA, which also serves as winter habitat for wildlife. Additional use by wild horses reduces the amount of food for elk and deer, as well as the amount of hiding cover for sage-grouse.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure. Continuous grazing by wild horses does not allow plants sufficient time to recover from grazing impacts. Such overgrazing results in reduced plant health, vigor, reproduction, and ultimately in a loss of native forage species from natural plant communities. Over time, this greatly diminishes habitat quality as abundance and the long-term production of desired plant communities is, and will continue to be, compromised.

Q. What are some of the effects of wild horse overpopulation on Threatened and Endangered Species?

A. Maintaining the existing wild horse overpopulation, which would increase with each successive foal crop, (approximately 17-22% annually in the Challis HMA) would result in continued and increasing impacts to threatened, endangered and sensitive species and their habitats. Upland habitats would continue to see heavy levels of utilization associated with wild horse use, in which areas of heavy use would continue to expand as wild horse populations continue to grow. Continued heavy grazing would occur on spring meadow systems and springs adversely affecting habitat important to the Greater Sage grouse as well as a host of other species. An overpopulation of excess horses reduces plant matter compromising watersheds, causing increased soil erosion. This erosion increases sediment into perennial streams which could impact fisheries including T&E fish habitat.

Q. Why is the BLM removing horses when, as of October 2019, there are already nearly 47,000 animals in holding?

A. The BLM must remove thousands of wild horses and burros from the range each year to protect public lands from the environmental impacts of herd overpopulation, such as soil erosion, sedimentation of streams and damage to wildlife habitat.

Although the BLM tries to place as many removed animals as possible into private care through adoption or sales, the public's demand for adoptable wild horses has declined sharply over the last 10-plus years, leaving the federal agency in the unsustainable position of gathering excess horses while its holding costs spiral upward.

Q. How much will this gather cost?

A. The BLM will calculate costs at the end of the gather.

Q. Where do the removed horses go?

A. Excess wild horses removed from the 2019 Challis HMA gather, will be transported to the Bruneau Off-Range Corral Facility, where they will be prepared for the BLM adoption and sales programs.

Q. What veterinary treatment will the removed horses receive?

A. The horses will be aged (based on the condition of their teeth), dewormed, vaccinated, blood-tested (for Equine Infectious Anemia), and freeze-marked (marked with a cold brand).

Q. Will there be any designated public observers at the trap site?

A. Yes. Once gather operations have begun, those wanting to view gather operations must call the Challis gather hotline nightly at (208) 879-6271 to receive specific instructions on each day's meeting location and time.

A BLM Public Affairs Specialist will meet the members of the public each morning at a specified location to escort them to the gather sites. Limitations will only be imposed to ensure safety and accomplishment of the mission. A "Know before You Go" handout will also be posted on the BLM website so observers are adequately prepared for the conditions on the gather sites.

Q. How far, in relation to the trap site, are the horses and foals being herded?

A. That will be determined by the Lead Contracting Officer Representative (COR) and the contractor but varies depending on health of the animals, terrain and weather. It is anticipated that most groups will be gathered from under 10 miles away from trap sites. The COR and on site APHIS Veterinarian will observe and monitor the horses as they are gathered and make appropriate determinations on travel distances and speeds.

Q. What Contractor will be used for this Gather?

A. Cattoor Livestock Co.

Q. Why does the BLM use helicopters to gather horses?

A. Helicopter-driven gathers have proven to be more humane, effective and efficient than other types of gather methods when large numbers of animals need to be removed over wide areas or rugged terrain. Helicopters are able to move horses and burros at a proper pace. Moreover, helicopter pilots can keep mares and foals together more effectively than a horseback rider and can also better move the animals around such barriers as deep ravines, fences or roads.

Q. Does the BLM use whips to move the horses through the pens and chute?

A. The BLM uses flags or noise-making paddles to move horses through the pens and chutes. The flags are usually made by attaching a plastic grocery bag to the end of a sorting stick or buggy whip. The flag prevents the stick or whip from hitting the horse with any sort of impact or sting to it. Seeing and hearing the plastic flag motivates the animal to move away from the source of the stimulus. This

technique is similar to those used for domestic and wild horses being trained using resistance-free methods.

Q. What happens to horses that are not adopted?

A. Unadopted horses are fed and cared for in either off-range corrals or off-range pastures. Wild horses more than 10 years old, and those passed over for adoption at least three times, become eligible for sale, a transaction in which the title of ownership to the animals passes immediately from the Federal government to the buyer. This process differs from adoption, in which the title of ownership passes from the Federal government to the adopter after the individual provides one year of humane care.

While a December 2004 law granting the BLM sale authority authorizes the agency to sell sale-eligible animals “without limitation,” the Bureau has **not been and is not selling any wild horses to slaughterhouses or to "killer buyers.” All horses in holding retain their status as “wild” animals and remain under the BLM’s protection.**

Q. Will any of the horses be sent to slaughter?

A. No. As noted above, while a December 2004 amendment to the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act authorizes the BLM to sell sale-eligible animals “without limitation,” the BLM has **not been and is not selling any wild horses to slaughterhouses or to “killer buyers.”**

Q. Where may I learn more about the Wild Horse and Burro Program?

A. Visit the BLM’s Website at www.blm.gov/whb.