

### **Attachment 3: Questions and Answers (for the Public and Media)**

***Q. What is the official name for this gather?***

**A.** 2020 Fish Creek HMA Wild Horse Gather (FY 2021)

***Q. Why is this gather necessary?***

**A.** The helicopter 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. The primary issue in this HMA is limited water, especially in relation to the population in excess of the established AML. The Mount Lewis Field Office has been hauling water and/or operating a well and a pipeline since 2012 to avert emergencies until a gather could occur. Despite hauling water for horses in the northern end of the HMA during the summer and fall of 2020, several horses are known to have died and others have been observed in poor body condition.

This gather is also in line with the ten-year plan approved in the Decision for the Fish Creek HMA Gather Plan Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-NV-B010-2015-0011-EA) signed February 9, 2015, which provided for future gathers to achieve and maintain the established AML in this HMA. Reducing the excess wild horses in the Fish Creek HMA will protect the health of the horses and the habitat in the HMA while providing opportunities for other wildlife, such as pronghorn antelope and Elk, to have a thriving ecosystem.

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

**A.** The BLM will gather up to 195 wild horses and remove up to 135 excess wild horses from in and around the Fish Creek HMA, located in Eureka County, directly south and west of Eureka, Nevada.

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

**A.** It is estimated that following the gather, approximately 105 wild horses will remain in the Fish Creek HMA, within the portion south of U.S. Highway 50.

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

**A.** The goal is to release a selection of horses back to the range. The goal is to release up to 30 mares and 30 studs total back to the range following the gather, which is also dependent upon the success of the gather – any mares released will be treated with fertility control (PZP-22).

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

**A.** The last gather to achieve the established AML was in February 2006.

***Q. How many of the mares gathered during this roundup will the BLM treat with the fertility-control vaccine?***

**A.** Approximately 30 mares would be treated with PZP-22 or receive a booster if they were previously treated in 2019.

***Q. How does this gather relate to the 2015 Fish Creek HMA Gather Plan Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-NV-B010-2015-0011-EA)?***

A. The 2015 EA included a Proposed Action that would include an initial gather in 2015 to capture and remove a specified number of horses while applying fertility control to a number of mares and releasing them back to the range.

The EA also include analysis for gathers and population growth suppression that could be implemented within the Fish Creek HMA and areas outside of the HMA over the next ten years. The EA included the intention for the BLM to return to the Fish Creek HMA at future intervals to continue to remove excess horses and implement fertility control in order to eventually achieve the AML and maintain that AML.

The 2020 gather is consistent with the 2015 EA and Decision as a subsequent operation to the 2015 gather. Following the 2020 gather, the post gather population should be close to or at the low range of AML or within the AML range.

The 2015 Fish Creek EA and Decision can be viewed here: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/42687/510>.

***Q. Why is the BLM removing horses that appear to be or are in good condition?***

A. The BLM gathers horses with different body conditions, including some that appear to be or are in good condition. The agency pro-actively gathers excess animals from overpopulated herds to prevent worst-case scenarios. In the case of the Fish Creek HMA, supplemental waters that normally would not be operational had been utilized since 2012 in addition to water hauling in order to keep the population healthy in the face of limited water, extreme drought and overpopulation.

***Q. Has any research been done to study the Fish Creek horses with curly coats or the genetics?***

A. During the 2015 gather operation, 168 hair samples were collected from mares and studs that were slated to be released back to the range following the gather. These samples were sent to Texas A&M for Ancestral Genetics Analysis. Once the analysis was complete, the BLM received back a report for each horse sampled which the top three genetic similarities. Once those results were tallied the breed that appeared most frequently was the Garrano, which is a breed from Portugal followed closely by the Galiceno, which is a breed from northern Spain that is closely related to the Garrano. The genetics report also noted high genetic variation and likely mixing from adjacent HMAs.

The BLM also collected extra hair samples from curly horses that would be released back to the range, which are currently being studied in the process of determining the specific mutations that cause the curly traits and where they originate. Research is ongoing at this time.

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

A. The Fish Creek horses are generally a smaller to mid-sized wild horse averaging 14-14.2 hands in height. They are somewhat stocky in build with good muscling and strong bones. There are a variety of colors with a strong prominence of roan colors and grays. Other colors include bay, brown, black, sorrel and palomino.

Feedback to the BLM about adopted Fish Creek horses has been positive. Several horses from the Fish Creek HMA were high bid winners at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center adoption events since 2015, and trainers there have commented that these horses have a “good mind”.



Wild horses in the Fish Creek HMA, July 25, 2019.

***Q. Is there livestock grazing in this area?***

**A.** Yes. The Fish Creek HMA overlaps portions of four livestock grazing allotments, both cattle and sheep. Livestock use complies with the grazing system outlined in the final multiple use decisions, agreements and term permit conditions that provide for periodic rest and deferment of key range sites. Most of the livestock use in this area occurs during the winter months. In recent years, several of the permittees have taken non-use for conservation and protection of the public lands. The non-use has been due to a number of factors including and other than the overpopulation of wild horses on the range.

***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 and 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-percent since the 1940s; actual (as distinguished from authorized) livestock grazing on public rangelands has declined by 30-percent since 1971.

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

**A.** Common wildlife species within the Fish Creek 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. Currently, the overabundant population of wild horses is adversely affecting valuable habitat needed to support both wildlife and wild horses.

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 to 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. If wild horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range. Large expanses of rangeland in the Fish Creek HMA are degraded due to historic over use by wild horses and livestock and current heavy use by the overpopulation of wild horses. Large areas of formerly perennial plants have been replaced by annual mustard and halogeton, and trailing is extensive in core areas leading to limited water sources.

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

A. Maintaining the existing wild horse over-population, which would increase with each successive foal crop, (approximately 17-22% annually in the Fish Creek HMA) would result in continued and increasing impacts to threatened, endangered and sensitive species and their habitats. Upland habitats would continue to see locally 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 effecting habitat important to the Greater Sage grouse as well as a host of other species.

***Q. Why is the BLM removing horses when, as of July 2020, there is 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 Fish Creek HMA gather, will be shipped to the Bruneau Off Range Corrals located southeast of Boise, Idaho where they will be prepared for the BLM's adoption and sales programs or long-term holding facilities located in Midwestern pastures.

***Q. What veterinary treatment will the removed horses receive?***

A. The horses will be aged (based on the condition of their teeth), de-wormed, 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 Fish Creek gather hotline nightly at (775) 861-6700 to receive specific instructions on each days' meeting location and time.

A PAO will meet 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 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 Roundup Inc. of Nephi, Utah

***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 better 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.** Un-adopted horses are fed and cared for in either short-term corrals or long-term pastures. Wild horses over 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. (In the adoption process, 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](http://www.blm.gov/whb).