

## **“2020 Diamond Complex or HMA Wild Horse Gather” Questions and Answers**

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

**A.** 2020 Diamond Complex Gather

***Q. Will the public be able to observe gather activities?***

**A.** Yes. The BLM designees will meet the public each morning at a specified meeting location to escort them to the gather sites. A “Know Before You Go” and the “Observation Protocol” handouts will also be posted on the BLM website, so observers are adequately prepared for the conditions on the gather sites.

All media and/or visitors wanting to go to the gather site will need to call the “Diamond Complex Wild Horse Gather information hotline” nightly at 775-861-6700 for daily meeting times as the time to meet is subject to change.

The number of media and public in the gather observation site may be limited to allow for social distancing. The [CDC](#) has offered guidance to help people visiting public lands prevent the spread of infectious diseases. We will continue to monitor all functions to ensure that visitors adhere to CDC guidance for mitigating risks associated with the transmission of COVID-19 and take any additional steps necessary to protect public health. During the gather, the observants should follow local area health orders including Governor Sisolak’s [standards](#) for individuals, businesses and employers, practice [Leave No Trace](#) principles, practice social distancing and avoid high-risk outdoor activities.

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

**A.** 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 BLM strives to be a good neighbor in the communities we serve; ensuring public safety within and outside of the HMAs is not at risk due to the overpopulation of wild horses and providing opportunities for other wildlife, such as pronghorn antelope, deer, and greater sage grouse, to have a thriving ecosystem.

The 2020 post foaling population of the Diamond Complex is 1,495 wild horses based on the most recent aerial inventory completed in April 2019. This represents a population that is over 700% of the established Appropriate Management Level (AML) of 210 wild horses. The overpopulation is impacting forage and water resources throughout the Complex, which is affecting important habitat for wildlife species and wild horses themselves.

Additionally, severe drought conditions exist throughout Central Nevada including the entire Diamond Complex. Field monitoring has found that perennial and annual plants alike did not grow much or grow at all in the lower and mid elevations of the Complex. For example, cheatgrass, which is an invasive annual plant that dominates the understory of much of the sagebrush communities in this area, did not grow and is not represented in the plant community of the mid and lower elevations. The lack of 2020 forage growth would inevitably cause emergency conditions for horses within the complex this winter as they try to locate forage. These same conditions were experienced during the most recent gather completed in February 2013 following severe drought conditions and overpopulation above the AML. More about the current drought status in Nevada can be learned at this link: <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?NV>

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

**A.** The BLM plans to gather 1,225 wild horses and remove 1,165 wild horses.

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

A. Up to 30 mares could be treated with PZP-22 and released back into the Diamond HMA with an equal number of studs released as well.

***Q. What will the remaining herd population of these HMAs be?***

A. Approximately 330 wild horses will remain in the Diamond Complex.

***Q. What species of wildlife inhabit the Diamond Complex?***

A. The Diamond Mountains and Diamond Hills support fauna characteristic of the northern Great Basin within sagebrush steppe, pinyon-juniper woodlands, cottonwood and aspen groves, and mountain shrub habitat types. Large mammals in the Diamond Complex include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus canadensis*) and mountain lion (*Felis concolor*). For mule deer, pockets of bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*) and other shrubs are particularly important for overwinter survival in the Diamond Complex. Elk have been observed in the Diamond Complex, but they only occur in small numbers near the southern periphery of the range. Other wide-ranging mammals include coyote (*Canis latrans*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), badger (*Taxidea taxus*), pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*), black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*), long-tailed weasel (*Mustela fretala*) and a variety of rodent species. Several bat species listed as BLM special status species (see Table 21) are also likely to occur in the mountains.

Birds include raptors, upland gamebirds, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, and several species of passerines. The most ubiquitous nesting raptors in the range are golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), and American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*). Ferruginous hawks (*Buteo regalis*) and prairie falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) also nest throughout the range, and aspen stands support nesting cooper's hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*), sharp-shinned hawks (*Accipiter striatus*) and potentially northern goshawks (*Accipiter gentilis*). During the winter, rough-legged hawks (*Buteo lagopus*) occur in relatively high densities in the adjacent valleys.

Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*), dusky grouse (*Dendragopus obscurus*) and greater sage-grouse are the primary upland game-birds in the range. Sage-grouse use large portions of the Diamond Complex throughout the year. Habitat requirements for sage-grouse typically include low and high-elevation sites that are dominated by sagebrush. Oftentimes, sage-grouse use low- to mid-elevation sagebrush for breeding (i.e., strutting grounds or leks), nesting and early brood-rearing, but move to higher elevations and riparian areas for late brood-rearing. Sage-grouse use sagebrush for cover and food throughout the year, but also require an herbaceous understory to provide nest concealment, as well as provide a diet of forbs and insects for adults and their chicks.

The Diamond Complex is located within the Diamond and South Fork Population Management Units (PMU) identified in Nevada sage grouse conservation plans. Although portions of the Diamond Mountains are considered to be critical habitat, and several historic leks occur in the area, the number of active sage-grouse leks near the Diamond Mountains has declined substantially over the past 40 years. Population declines are likely principally related to reductions in the availability and degraded condition of lowland breeding habitat. However, changes in the condition of valuable brood-rearing habitat on meadows, springs and other riparian habitat that occur mainly on the southern portions of the range may also be a factor in the declining populations here.

Other animal species within the Diamond Complex include lizards, snakes, a few amphibians, and a diversity of insects. Only two native fish species occur in the range, the Newark Valley tui chub (*Gila bicolor newarkensis*) and the Diamond Valley speckled dace (*Rhinichthys osculus*; see Nevada Department of Wildlife). Populations of both species are low and relegated to springs at lower elevations. A few perennial streams in the range contain non-native brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*).

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

A. Yes. There are nine grazing allotments in the Diamond Complex. Permitted use is for sheep and cattle. Seasons and species vary by allotment and grazing rotation/system. More detail can be found in the Diamond Complex Wild Horse Gather Plan Environmental Assessment at <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/34561/570>. Livestock management is a permitted use under each District's Land Use Plan. Livestock use is applied for and permitted on an annual basis.

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

A. No. The BLM carries out removal of wild horses from public rangelands to ensure rangeland health and in accordance with land-use plans that were developed in an open, public process. These land-use plans are how the BLM carries out its core mission, which is to manage the land for multiple uses while protecting the land's resources. Wild horses are considered a resource, whereas livestock is considered a use. Management of each is covered under different Federal Regulations and laws. 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. 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 be compromised. If wild horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

The terrain within the Diamond Complex varies from low valleys to high mountains with elevations ranging from 5,400 feet to over 10,000 feet. Vegetation types are distributed according to topography, elevation and precipitation. The valley bottoms are typically large alkali flats supporting salt tolerant plants such as alkali sacaton, inland saltgrass and alkali bluegrass. The lower, drier elevation consists of saltbrush, greasewood, sagebrush and a variety of annual and perennial grasses. Pinyon-Juniper communities are prevalent in the alluvial fans and hillsides. Cottonwood-Aspen stands are common around riparian areas on the Diamond Mountains. Mountain big sagebrush, antelope bitterbrush, snowberry, serviceberry and curleaf mountain mahogany with an understory of bluebunch wheatgrass, needlegrass species, Indian ricegrass and bottlebrush squirreltail dominate the higher elevations. Many of the plant communities in the Diamond Complex are degraded and represented by dominant understories of cheatgrass to the detriment of deep rooted perennial grasses and forbs. Additional detail about the vegetation and wildlife of the Complex can be found in the Diamond Complex Wild Horse Gather Plan Environmental Assessment at <https://go.usa.gov/xG4UT>.

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

A. Currently, there are no known federally listed or proposed species found in the Diamond Complex. However the populations of some species are declining and warrant special management actions to insure population viability. One species that occurs within the range, the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), is listed as a candidate for federal listing as a threatened or endangered species by the USFWS.

In addition to sage-grouse, the Nevada BLM has listed several other species (see IM-NV-2011-059-1) whose populations are considered to be at risk and warrant attention, and are considered Special Status Species. Maintaining the existing wild horse over-population, which would increase with each successive foaling season, (approximately 15-20% annually in the HMAs) would result in continued and increasing impacts to populations and habitats of all wildlife. 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 and meadow systems and creeks adversely effecting greater sage-grouse habitat.

***Q. Why is the BLM removing horses when there is already over 47,000 animals currently 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 of the 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. 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.

Injury and death rates of helicopter gathers are similar to non-helicopter gather methods such as bait and water trapping. Most of the deaths reported during all gathers are for animals euthanized with pre-existing issues such as old injuries that did not heal well, or severe tooth wear. Injuries to horses during gathers typically occurs once the horses are in the trap or holding corrals. Accidental death or the need to humanely euthanize animals as a *direct result* of gather activities is infrequent and averages less than one half to one percent of the wild horses gathered (0.5-1.0%). Another roughly 0.6% of the animals captured were humanely euthanized due to *pre-existing conditions* and in accordance with BLM policy.

The BLM has been actively conducting wild horse gathers since the mid 1970's and using helicopter to gather wild horses since the late 1970's. Over time, methods and procedures have been developed and refined so as to minimize stress and impacts to wild horses during implementation of gathers. BLM staff is on-site at all times to observe the gather, monitor animal health, and coordinate the gather activities with the contractor. A veterinarian from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service will be on-site at the gather at all times to observe horses at the trap site and holding corrals.

***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.

***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 like those used for domestic and wild horses being trained using resistance-free methods.

***Q. What Contractor will be used for this Gather?***

**A.** Sampson Livestock, Heber City, Utah

***Q. How much will this gather cost?***

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

***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 on a three-to-five-year cycle to prevent worst-case scenarios. Due to the severe drought conditions in addition to the population being 700% over the AML, the BLM is anticipating emergency conditions and starving horses in the coming winter. Waiting to gather horses when they have deteriorated in body condition is harder on the horses, and lowers their health. Proper range management, wild horse management and principles of humane treatment warrant gathers to occur before emergency conditions arise when possible.

***Q. Where do the removed horses go?***

**A.** Excess wild horses, removed from this gather, will be shipped to the Palomino Valley Off-Range Corrals located north of Sparks, Nevada, 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.** Once the horses arrive at the Palomino Valley facility, the horses will be aged (based on the condition of their teeth), de-wormed, vaccinated, blood-tested for EIA, and freeze-marked (marked with a cold brand).

***Q. What are the horses of the Diamond Complex like?***

**A.** The primary colors of the horses captured from within the Diamond Complex included bays, sorrels, and browns. Other colors included palomino, buckskin, chestnut, grey, variations of roan, and pinto/paint. Horses from the Diamond Complex are typically of a larger size with good conformation and heavy bone structure. Some adopted Diamond Complex horses have been known to be somewhat drafty in appearance. It is expected that the horses removed during the gather will be highly adoptable and show to be versatile in many areas of equine activities. Refer to the Diamond Complex Wild Horse Gather Plan Environmental Assessment at <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/34561/570> for more information and photos of the horses of the Diamond Complex as well as the Flickr album available here: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/blmnevada/albums/72157715802388581>

***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.

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

**A.** No. 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. Where may I learn more about the Wild Horse and Burro Program?***

**A.** The BLM's Website is located at [www.blm.gov/whb](http://www.blm.gov/whb).