

## **Fish Creek Herd Management Area Wild Horse and Burro Gather Questions and Answers**

### ***Why is the BLM gathering wild horses in the Fish Creek Herd Management Area (HMA)?***

Based on a review of monitoring, inventory and other information, the BLM has determined that excess wild horses are present within the Fish Creek HMA and need to be removed in order to prevent further deterioration of rangeland resources as well as to comply with the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, achieve a population consistent with the established Appropriate Management Level (AML), and meet Land Use Planning (LUP ) objectives. This assessment is based on factors including, but not limited to the following:

- Severe and Extreme drought conditions experienced in the Fish Creek HMA since 2012 as documented by the U.S. Drought Monitor <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>.
- Field monitoring since 2012 has documented drought conditions and impacts to the health of water sources and upland vegetation, and availability of forage and water to wild horses.
- The current estimated wild horse population within the Fish Creek HMA (549 wild horses south of Highway 50, based on an inventory count in March 2014) exceeds the AML (101-170 wild horses) as established through the 2004 Final Multiple Use Decision and wild horses is exceeding the forage allocated to their use.
- Due to drought conditions which have reduced water availability, coupled with the overpopulation of wild horses exceeding AML, water hauling has been necessary since 2012 to ensure adequate water for healthy wild horses.
- The Fish Creek HMA has a history of emergency wild horse gathers primarily due to lack of water resources. As a result, the AML was established conservatively to take that into account.
- The current population of wild horses in the Fish Creek HMA is contributing to impact on rangeland health including heavy utilization of key perennial forage species, trailing and erosion.

### ***Will BLM remove all the wild horses that are gathered?***

One of the main objectives of the proposed gather is to apply fertility control to the mares re-released to the HMA to slow population growth and help reduce the need for future gathers. Younger horses primarily 3 years of age or younger would be removed and transported to BLM facilities for inclusion into the adoption program. Overall, it is estimated that only 200 horses will be removed, which constitutes about 36% of the existing population. It is estimated that about 349 wild horses would remain within the HMA after the completion of the gather, which would still be about 205% of the AML.

### ***What is the current population and AML of these HMAs?***

The current population of the Fish Creek HMA is based on a helicopter inventory completed in March 2014, and adjusted for estimated foals born during the spring 2014. This inventory included only the portion of the HMA south of U.S. Highway 50, as the portion north will be managed in the future with the Roberts Mountain Complex.

The helicopter inventory resulted in a “direct count” made by three experienced BLM observers and the pilot. The Double Simultaneous Count (DSC) method was also applied. The DSC data has not been processed and the estimated population is based on the direct count. Refer to Map 2 which displays the distribution of wild horses observed during the March 2014 inventory.

The following table shows the estimated population, acres and AML for the Fish Creek HMA. The portion of the HMA north of U.S. Highway 50 is not included in these figures<sup>1</sup>.

**Table 1: Fish Creek HMA Population and AML**

HMA	Acres	AML	2014 Inventory Direct Count	Estimated 2014 Population	% of AML
Fish Creek	230,675	101-170	478	549	323 <sup>2</sup> %

***What is BLM doing to prevent health problems with wild horses during the gather?***

BLM staff is on-site at all times to observe the gather, monitor animal health, and coordinate the gather activities with the contractor. In addition, the BLM will implement its Comprehensive Animal Welfare Policy to ensure that the gather is conducted in a safe and humane manner, and to minimize potential impacts to or injury of the wild horses. Both the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Specialists and the gather contractor and crew are very attentive and sensitive to the needs of all wild horses captured during gathers, and ensuring their health, safety and well-being during and after the gather is a focus and priority.

An U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS) veterinarian or other veterinarian will be on-site during the gather to examine animals and make recommendations to the BLM for the care and treatment of wild horses.

Additional pen space at the temporary holding corrals may be provided for weaker animals to keep them separated from stronger ones for added care.

**GATHER PROCESS QUESTIONS**

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1 The portion of the Fish Creek HMA north of U.S. Highway 50 is 19,394 acres in size with an AML of 6-10 wild horses. This area is managed with the Roberts Mountain Complex.

2 The % of AML does include estimated foals that would have been born during the spring 2014 beyond the 15 observed during the inventory in March. The % of AML of only the adults is estimated to be 272%.

### ***Where is the BLM gathering the wild horses?***

The Fish Creek Herd Management Area (HMA) is located just a few miles south of Eureka, Nevada in the Antelope and Little Smokey Valleys and in the Antelope and Fish Creek Mountains. The area is approximately 252,813 acres in size and is 25 miles wide and 28 miles long. The majority of the HMA is comprised of north-south trending mountain ranges that include all or portions of the Fish Creek Range, the Mahogany Hills, and the Antelope Range. Elevations range from 6,300 feet in the wide valley bottoms, reaching 10,100 feet at Nine Mile Peak.

Actual locations for the trap site, temporary holding, and other gather operations will depend on the location of the wild horses when the gather process begins.

### ***When did BLM last gather in this area?***

The most recent gather of this area was the Fish Creek Complex gather completed in July 2005 and February 2006. The Fish Creek Complex gather included not only the Fish Creek HMA, but also the Sevenmile, Little Fish Lake and North Monitor HMAs, and their associated USFS WHTs.

Drought emergency gathers were conducted in 2000 and 2004 before the Appropriate Management Level (AML) was established that would have allowed a comprehensive gather to take place. A total of 600 wild horses were captured and removed from the range in 2000 to prevent death due to starvation and lack of water. An additional 55 wild horses were removed in 2004 for the same reasons.

A one-year fertility control vaccine was last administered to released mares during a gather in 1998; however population growth suppression treatments have not been administered since that time.

### ***How many wild horses will be gathered and removed during this gather?***

One of the main objectives of the proposed gather is to apply fertility control to the mares re-released to the HMA to slow population growth and help reduce the need for future gathers. Younger horses primarily 3 years of age or younger would be removed and transported to BLM facilities for inclusion into the adoption program. Overall, it is estimated that the BLM will gather up to 500 horses -- only 200 horses will be removed, which constitutes about 36% of the existing population. It is estimated that about 349 wild horses would remain within the HMA after the completion of the gather.

The BLM's helicopter-assisted gathers have proven to be humane, effective, and efficient compared with other types of gather methods when large numbers of animals need to be gathered over wide areas or rugged terrain. Since 2004, BLM Nevada has gathered over 42,000 excess animals. Of these, gather related mortality has averaged only 0.5% which is very low when handling wild animals. Another 0.6% of the animals captured were humanely euthanized due to pre-existing conditions and in accordance

with BLM policy. On many gathers, no wild horses are injured or die. On some gathers, due to the temperament of the horses, they are not as calm and injuries are more frequent.

### ***How does the BLM gather wild horses?***

Gathers can be completed through bait and water trapping or with the use of a helicopter to gently herd horses into temporary corrals. Gathers can be completed by a Federal gather contractor or “in-house” by BLM employees. For helicopter gathers in Nevada, a contractor is generally used. The pilot locates and herds horses towards a set of corrals where the horses are gathered. The helicopter is assisted by a ground crew and the use of a Prada horse, a domesticated horse, to lead the gathered horses into the corrals. If needed, the ground crew may assist the helicopter by roping the horses from horseback.

## **FERTILITY CONTROL QUESTIONS**

### ***Will the BLM use fertility control on this gather?***

As part of a population growth suppression program for the Fish Creek HMA that is designed to achieve and maintain AML over 10 years, the BLM will be applying the fertility control vaccine porcine zona pellucida (PZP) to approximately 150 mares, which will then be released back to the range. By applying the fertility control vaccine, the BLM is helping to slow the population growth on the range and help reduce the need for future gathers.

## **LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT OF HMA QUESTIONS**

### ***What is the environment like in the HMA?***

The gather area is located in Central Nevada within the Great Basin. The majority of the HMA is comprised of north-south trending mountain ranges that include all or portions of the Fish Creek Range, the Mahogany Hills, and the Antelope Range. Elevations range from 6,300 feet in the wide valley bottoms, reaching 10,100 feet at Nine Mile Peak.

Much of the rangeland at lower elevations consists of salt desert shrub and either Wyoming big sagebrush or black sagebrush plant communities. Pinyon and Juniper are prevalent in the mid and upper elevations. Precipitation averages 5-8 inches per year in the valleys and 16+ inches in the highest elevations. Drought conditions may occur 1 out of every 3-4 years, and the majority of the area has been within Severe and Extreme Drought since 2012.

### ***How was AML established in the Fish Creek HMA?***

The BLM typically determines the AMLs for wild horses and burros based on an ongoing program of monitoring over several years involving studies of grazing utilization, trend in range ecological condition, actual use, precipitation (climate), the results of land health assessments, and other factors.

The AML for the allotments within the Fish Creek HMA was established through the Final Multiple Use Decision (FMUD) issued by the MLFO September 27, 2004, following the analysis of monitoring data and completion of the Fish Creek Complex Evaluation and Rangeland Health Assessment and EA #NV062-EA04-69. The AML was determined to be the level of use by wild horses, which would provide for a thriving natural ecological balance and prevent deterioration of the range. The AML was also determined to be the level which would provide for healthy wild horse populations within the capacity of the habitat to provide forage and water. The AML was established following the collection, analysis, and interpretation of many years of monitoring data, which included precipitation, use pattern mapping, trend, production, census/inventory, riparian functioning condition ratings, and carrying capacity analysis, and through coordination with the interested public. Monitoring data including vegetation trend, utilization, water availability, wild horse inventory and distribution, actual use and climate data has been collected through an ongoing monitoring program since the AML was established.

Monitoring completed throughout the Fish Creek HMA since the AML was established does not indicate that AML should be adjusted. In fact, monitoring indicates that the established AML should be achieved in order to promote rangeland recovery, and to make progress towards attainment of the RAC Standards and Guidelines for Rangeland Health.

### ***Does wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?***

Yes, it can. Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure, and continuous grazing 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 long-term production of desired plant communities is compromised.

Wild horse also compete with wildlife for water sources, particularly where waters are limited or during drought years when existing sources do not produce normally or go dry. Horses have been found to have some effect on the frequency of use of a water source by other wildlife in arid environments. Two water haul locations in addition to a pumped well and a five-trough pipeline has been operated by the BLM within the Fish Creek HMA since 2012 to provide water to wild horses during drought.

A variety of wildlife species can be found on the Fish Creek HMA: mule deer, pronghorn antelope, elk, coyote, bobcat, mountain lion and numerous raptors, reptiles, and other small mammals. As part of its multiple-use mission, the BLM is mandated to protect habitat to support these wildlife species. BLM is also required to comply with the Endangered Species Act. Currently, the Western yellow-billed cuckoo is the only known federally listed species that may occur in the Fish Creek HMA. One species that occurs within the range, the greater sage-grouse, is listed as a candidate for federal listing as a threatened or endangered species by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

### ***Why don't you just make more land available to the wild horses?***

The BLM would need approval from Congress to expand herd management areas for wild horses and burros. By law, wild horses and burros can only be managed on areas of public lands where they were known to exist in 1971, at the time of the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

## **RANGE/GRAZING QUESTIONS**

### ***Is there livestock grazing in this area?***

Yes. Livestock grazing is authorized within the Fish Creek HMA; however, since 2009 the average actual use within these allotments has been at 62% of the permitted use. In 2014, the actual use was 4,353 AUMs, or 49% of the permitted use. The grazing allotments included within the proposed gather areas are Arambel, Fish Creek Ranch, Lucky C, and Ruby Hill. The four grazing allotments (south of U.S. Highway 50) total approximately 417,000 acres in size. The Fish Creek HMA overlaps 230,675 acres or approximately 55% of the grazing allotment acreage.

The annual total permitted use for the permittees combined is 8,855 Animal Unit Months in the four allotments, including non-HMA lands. The breakdown is as follows:

- Arambel: 1,349 AUMs
- Fish Creek Ranch: 4,815 AUMs
- Lucky C: 1,405 AUMs (for portion south of Highway 50)
- Ruby Hill: 1,286 AUMs

### ***Has BLM issued decisions to remove livestock from allotments within the Fish Creek HMA?***

No, not at this time. Starting in 2012, livestock numbers have been reduced across the Battle Mountain District through voluntary agreements by permittees and through Decisions issued by the District in light of reduced forage and water and to protect resources from overuse. Drought utilization and stubble height triggers were implemented to facilitate monitoring and subsequent management actions.

Within the allotments in the Fish Creek HMA, voluntary reductions were also made in livestock AUMs. For the 2014 grazing year the following reductions in AUMs occurred: Arambel Allotment 44%, Fish Creek Ranch Allotment 49%, Ruby Hill Allotment 59% and in Lucky C Allotment 56%.

Across the West, authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed land has declined by nearly 50 percent since the 1940s. Of that authorized use, actual livestock grazing use on public rangelands has declined by 30 percent since 1971.

When changes to livestock management are proposed, they would be analyzed through a site-specific environmental assessment. Future completion of Rangeland Health Assessments would involve the analysis of monitoring data, potential carrying capacity calculations and adjustments to livestock grazing, and would include participation from the interested public.

***Is the BLM removing wild horses and burros to make room for more cattle grazing?***

No. The removal of wild horses and burros from public rangelands is carried out to ensure rangeland health and sustainability.

## **CONTRACTOR QUESTIONS**

***How does the BLM select its gather contractors?***

The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded in 2010 following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review was evaluation of the prospective contractor's knowledge, skill, and ability to gather and handle wild horses and burros in a safe, effective, and humane manner.

***What contractor will be conducting the Fish Creek Wild Horse Gather?***

Cattoor Livestock of Nephi, Utah.

***Does the contractor use whips to move the wild horses through the pens and chute?***

The contractor uses flags or noise-making paddles to move wild 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.

## **POST GATHER QUESTIONS**

***What happens to the wild horses after they are gathered?***

The BLM will host an on-site adoption event in conjunction with the Fish Creek Gather at the BLM Eureka Fire Station on February 28. Approximately 10-20 yearlings and weanlings removed from the range during this gather will be made available for adoption. All animals will be freeze marked, vaccinated, dewormed and Coggins-tested for Equine Infectious Anemia.

The remaining animals will be transported to the National Wild Horse and Burro Center at Palomino Valley outside Reno, NV, where they will be prepared for the BLM adoption program, or for long-term holding. The animals will be checked by a veterinarian, receive vaccinations and freeze marks, and will be made available for adoption within a few weeks of arriving at the facility.

Per population estimates as of March 1, 2014, the BLM estimates that about 49,209 wild horses and burros (about 40,815 horses and 8,394 burros) are roaming on BLM-managed rangelands in 10 Western states and 25,035 in Nevada alone. Off the range, as of January 2015 there are 47,925 additional wild horses and burros that are fed and cared for at off-range corrals and pastures.

### ***How can I adopt one of the wild horses?***

Potential adopters should read the adoption requirements and complete and adoption application prior to the adoption event. Adoption applications can be found on BLM's website here: <http://go.usa.gov/hHVP>. Potential adopters must have the proper facilities and financial means to care for an adopted animal, and we always hope that they have experience working with a wild horse or burro, which will help ensure the gentling process.

All adoptions will be conducted through lottery drawing, first-come, first-served, or competitive bid. The base fee is \$125.

During the first year, the government retains title to the adopted animal(s), and will conduct compliance checks throughout the year in an effort to ensure as much as possible that the animal is being properly cared for and has gone to a good home. At the end of the first year, if the adopter has complied with all the adoption stipulations and has properly cared for their mustang or burro for one year, he or she is eligible to receive title, or ownership, from the Federal government.

The remaining animals not adopted at the on-site adoption event will be transported to the National Wild Horse and Burro Center at Palomino Valley outside Reno, NV, where they will be prepared for the BLM adoption program, or for long-term holding. The animals will be checked by a veterinarian, receive vaccinations and freeze marks, and will be made available for adoption within a few weeks of arriving at the facility.

Since 1971, when Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, the BLM has adopted out more than 230,000 horses and burros.

For more information about the BLM's Adopt-A-Horse or Burro program, please visit the Wild Horse and Burro Program website at <http://go.usa.gov/hHpW> or you may call 1-866-4Mustangs (866-468-7826) with any questions about the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.

### ***Will any of the wild horses be sent to slaughter?***

No. A December 2004 amendment to the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act authorizes the BLM to sell sale-eligible animals “without limitation,” however BLM policy does not allow for the sale of any wild horses to slaughterhouses or to “kill buyers.”

***Why is the BLM still removing wild horses when there are already 47,925 wild horses and burros in holding?***

The BLM removes wild horses and burros from the range each year for a variety of reasons, including to comply with court orders, to remove wild horses on private lands, and 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, adoption rates have declined sharply in recent years, leaving the agency in the position of gathering excess horses while its holding costs spiral upward.