

National Wild Horse & Burro Advisory Board Recommendations
September 24, 2020

Present: Ms. Susan McAlpine, Dr. Sue McDonnell, Dr. Barry Perryman, Ms. Celeste Carlisle, Mr. Fred Woehl, Jr., Dr. Tom Lenz, Mr. Jim French, Mr. Steven Yardley, Dr. Vernon Bleich

1. The Board recommends that BLM immediately begin to integrate wildlife management plan concepts (template developed by wildlife management agencies) on an HMA-by-HMA basis into a comprehensive, range wide WH&B management plan that includes contingencies for stochastic events and rangeland integrity, including riparian habitats.

Approved. Vote was unanimous.

Bureau of Land Management – The BLM does and will continue to analyze site-specific plans on an HMA and/or complex basis. In NEPA analyses for each HMA (or complex), the BLM analyzes impacts to wild horse and burro herds, wildlife including T&E species, resources and resource values, including a review of impacts to soils, vegetation management practices, rangeland management practices, water resources, air resources, wetland and riparian areas, cultural resources, and mineral resources.

The BLM will continue to follow all of the NEPA guidelines that require the agency to analyze the effects of proposed wild horse and burro management actions in the context of the agency's multi-use mandate. In the case of stochastic events, such as wildland fire or severe drought, BLM specialists will continue to monitor and assess the health of the animals and natural resources, and to take emergency management actions if needed. BLM tries to make such assessments in an interdisciplinary manner, communicating and collaborating with state and local agencies, where possible, to ensure the overall health of the land and animals.

2. The Board recommends that future research include: development and implementation of predictive models for animal movements that will likely expand resource degradation areas; and development and application of new tools (e.g., terrestrial laser scanners, drones, GPS collars) to measure concurrent forage use among large herbivores.

Approved. Vote was unanimous.

Bureau of Land Management - The BLM appreciates this suggestion to improve understandings about the interactions between wild horse and burro populations of various sizes, their habitat selection and resource utilization, and the resulting effects on resources. The BLM is increasing its use of GPS telemetry to record the movements of wild horses and burros. This includes recently started monitoring of fertility-control treated mares at Swasey HMA, Sulphur HMA (Utah) and Eagle HMA (Nevada), and work begun in 2019 examining habitat use of wild horses, livestock, and sage-grouse at Desatoya HMA (Nevada).

- *The BLM WHB Program is preparing an update to the 2005 WHB Research Strategy. This recommendation from the board will be considered as the program continues to develop the updated WHB research strategy. The board's new member for Research has been contributing to review early drafts of the new WHB research strategy, as did the previous member for Research (Dr. McDonnell). Because of the current on-range population size and high growth rates, developing and testing long-term, single-application fertility control methods is likely to remain the highest research priority.*

Any specific funding decision about the types of proposed research projects or new tools mentioned in the board's recommendation would be subject to the same decision-making process behind other BLM-funded WHB research. That is to say, decisions about specific proposals would be contingent upon, among other considerations, the quality of proposals received, the feasibility of the work, the perceived benefit to BLM's management program, and funding availability.

3. The Board recommends that the agency expand fertility control implementation and develop measurable objectives outlining a targeted reproductive growth rate reduction and multi-year plans, on an HMA-by-HMA basis. The effort should include fertility control treatments combined with gather operations, including HMAs where AML will not immediately be achieved. The Board recognizes that reproductive growth rates on the range must be reduced immediately so that overall numbers of horses or burros, as well as overall numbers of gathers, begins downward trending.

Approved. Vote was unanimous.

Bureau of Land Management - As noted in the BLM's 2020 report to Congress, the agency intends to expand its use of fertility control as part of its overall strategy to achieve and maintain herds at AML. The strategy will use a combination of removals and fertility control measures. In recent years, the majority of environmental assessments for herd management are analyses of multi-year plans that include fertility control. The BLM's final decisions have generally selected multi-year action alternatives with fertility control in addition to removals. The BLM recognizes the desirability of reducing herd growth rates immediately, but current herd sizes and finite funding limit the practicality of applying fertility control and returning animals to the range, until herds are closer to AML.

4. The Board recommends BLM compile and furnish to the Board an inventory of HMAs that have current, approved National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) decision documents, that contain fertility control components, as well as the type of fertility control(s) acceptable within the limits of that document.

Approved. Vote was unanimous.

Bureau of Land Management – The BLM will work, within its current staffing and workload priorities, to provide such an inventory to the Advisory Board. Compiling some of the information will require correspondence with, and searches by, district and field offices, in cases where older records of decisions or herd management area plans are not available in digital formats. Until this is complete, all recent planning documents are available to the public on the BLM National NEPA e-planning site located at: <https://www.blm.gov/programs/planning-and-nepa/eplanning>

5. The Board recommends that the BLM continue research into long term fertility control options, but that shorter-term, currently available safe and humane methods be utilized immediately. As longer-term fertility control modalities become available, the Board recommends that they be implemented, especially in more challenging HMAs, in order to increase management options.

Approved. Vote was unanimous.

Bureau of Land Management – The BLM thanks the Board for this recommendation. BLM’s 2020 “Report to Congress: An Analysis of Achieving a Sustainable Wild Horse and Burro Program” makes clear that BLM intends to follow the actions in this recommendation. The full report can be found at: <https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/WHB-Report-2020-NewCover-051920-508.pdf>

6. The Board recommends that BLM identify the behavioral, physiological, and social differences between wild horses and burros. BLM should expand the program’s capabilities to manage burro populations humanely and appropriately based on those differences and burro interactions (neutral, negative, and facilitative) with other wildlife.

Approved. Vote was unanimous.

Bureau of Land Management - In its analyses of management decisions, the BLM already draws on available scientific literature about wild burros. The BLM has begun to arrange for webinars in which managers speak with researchers who shares results of recent studies into burro ecology, behavior, physiology, and interactions with native wildlife species such as mountain lions, and endangered tortoises. Some of those research projects have been funded by the BLM, and some by other sources. The webinars are made available to BLM WHB staff and advisory board members. The resulting information may be included in analyses of future BLM decisions that could affect wild burros.

7. In order to improve the BLM’s WH&B program decision efficiency and identify areas in

need of improvement, the Board recommends an external audit of systemic internal organizational strategy and structure, capabilities and protocols. The Board recommends that BLM work collaboratively with diverse stakeholder groups. The transparent audit should be performed by a neutral, third party with capabilities in organizational structure and set up. The Board should have an active, robust, and positive role.

Approved. Eight in favor, one abstain, Dr. Vernon Bleich

Bureau of Land Management – Over the past few years, the BLM has been audited by the Government Accountability Office and the Department of the Interior’s Office of the Inspector General related to Program operations. The WHB Program embraced the recommendations of these external agencies and implemented changes, as appropriate (i.e., <https://www.doioig.gov/reports> or <https://www.gao.gov/index.html>). The agency maintained organizational effectiveness during the ‘move west’ reorganization, and streamlined some of its business practices. The program continues to work collaboratively with leadership in the states in managing daily Program operations. The latest Table of Organization is posted on the BLM website at <https://www.blm.gov/about/organization-chart/>. The Board received a handout at the September 2020 meeting with the WHB program roles and responsibilities.