

Talking Points
National Wild Horse and Burro Program
(updated 3/14/2023)

Background

- The BLM (and the U.S. Forest Service) manages and protects wild horses and burros under the authority of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.
- The goal of the Act is to preserve and protect wild horses and burros as integral parts of a thriving ecological system in balance with other public resource values, including wildlife, livestock grazing, mineral and energy resource development and recreational access.
- The BLM manages wild horses and burros on 177 herd management areas comprising 26.9 million acres of public land in 10 Western states.
- The estimated population of wild horses and burros living on public lands in March of 2022 was 82,384 animals. This estimated population is three times the appropriate management level of 26,785, which is the population BLM deems sustainable over the long term.

Effects of Overpopulation and Drought

- With virtually no natural predators that can control herd growth, left unchecked wild horse and burro populations can double every four to five years.
- Chronic wild horse and burro overpopulation on fragile desert and sagebrush ecosystems, with scarce forage and water, endangers overall land health with the possibility of permanent, irrecoverable damage to important resources. This puts other wildlife and other rangeland resources at great risk along with the wild horses and burros themselves.
- As climate change drives more frequent and extreme drought events across the West, the impacts of overpopulation on rangeland and animal health will be amplified. The damaging impacts of drought will further reduce availability of water and forage for wild horses and wildlife, especially in areas of public lands where wild horses and burros are chronically overpopulated.
- In 2022, the BLM initiated emergency actions to save more than 1,000 animals that were suffering from the impact of severe drought.
- To a very large extent, management of water resources lies outside BLM's direct control. In many areas, the agency relies on partnerships and cooperation with private landowners to ensure access to water.

Plan Forward

- The BLM continues to implement a multi-year plan to achieve and maintain the appropriate management level of wild horses and burros on public lands using a variety of management tools, including gathers to reduce overpopulation, fertility control to slow future growth, and adoptions to place excess animals into good homes.
- The President's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2024 requests nearly \$154.8 million for the Wild Horse and Burro Program to complete important management efforts.

Gathers and Removals

- Gathering and removing excess animals for private care and maintenance remains the best, most humane way to effectively reduce overpopulation in wild horse and burro herds.
- The BLM uses a combination of bait-trap and helicopter-assisted gather techniques to safely remove animals and reduce overpopulation.
- BLM and contract staff adhere to a Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program during all gathers. The Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program outlines required best practices and humane handling standards that prioritize the health and well-being of the wild animals. For example, the standards do not allow contact with helicopters, traveling excessive distances and/or gathering in extreme temperatures.
 - In FY2022, the BLM completed 25 CAWP internal assessments showing good use of established animal welfare standards. The assessments included seven gathers, one adoption/sale event and 17 off-range corrals.
- Injuries to wild horses and burros during gathers are rare. The vast majority (98-99%) of wild horses and burros are gathered without severe incident or injury that causes death. [A recent study published in the Journal of Equine Veterinary Science](#) found that BLM's wild horse and burro gathers are considered much safer than similar gather operations (usually for scientific research projects) of elk, deer, and caribou.
 - In FY2022, out of a record 22,000 animals gathered, less than one quarter of one percent (52 animals) were lost due to an injury that occurred at the gather event.
- Gathers are also an important tool for applying fertility control vaccines to captured animals. Most herds are not conducive to ground-darting operations because it is difficult or impossible to locate, track and approach animals across thousands of acres of rugged terrain.
- During emergency situations (such as drought-caused starvation or thirst), a gather is the best way for the BLM to remove imperiled animals.

- Removed animals are checked by BLM staff and a veterinarian and either prepared for private adoption/sale, transported to long-term care on a pasture, or treated with fertility control and released back to the range.
- The BLM recognizes that gathers and removals alone will not enable the agency to help herds reach and stay at the appropriate management level. Other strategic approaches – in particular, expanded use of humane fertility control and more successful adoptions and sales – are critical to meeting the long-term challenges facing the BLM.

Fertility Control

- Where it is effective to do so, the BLM is committed to implementing safe, humane fertility control measures to limit herd growth and reduce the need for future removals of excess animals. Every BLM management action for wild horses and burros on public lands must consider the use of fertility control in the range of alternatives.
- The BLM has ramped up its fertility control efforts in recent years. In Fiscal Year 2022, the BLM completed more fertility control (1,622 treatments) than has ever been completed in a year, following a record-setting year in 2021.
- The BLM primarily uses *Porcine Zona Pellucida*, or PZP, for fertility control but is increasing its use of the *GonaCon-Equine* vaccine, which has the potential to last more than twice as long as PZP if followed up with boosters. The BLM has also begun to use specialized Intra-uterine Devices (IUDs) made of soft silicone for non-pregnant mares.
 - The PZP vaccine is generally only effective for 1-2 years, after which an annual booster is required to maintain effectiveness. There is some evidence that GonaCon-Equine can last up to 5-6 years if boosted after the initial dose, which would reduce the need to gather animals every 1-2 years for boosting PZP treatments.
- When more herds approach appropriate management level in the coming years, the BLM will increase efforts to use fertility control to maintain healthy herd sizes, depending on Congressional funding.
- Some wild horses can be remotely darted with fertility control vaccines. The BLM often works with volunteers and partners to identify, track and dart wild horses to help control growth in some smaller herds. Most wild horses in larger, more remote herds are not approachable enough to be darted and would need to be gathered for treatment. For those herds, the BLM must capture, treat, and release the animals back to public lands.
- For herds that are close to a sustainable size, the BLM is prioritizing fertility control treatments to slow future growth and reduce the need for removals.

- The BLM outlined its research priorities and lays out a plan to address management needs through scientific advances in its 2021 Wild Horse and Burro Strategy Research Plan. The plan identifies the development of longer-lasting fertility control methods as a top research priority for the BLM.
- The BLM remains committed to developing better, longer-lasting fertility control methods that can be used to effectively slow growth in more herds. The BLM is reviewing both private and public proposals received in response to a solicitation for new research projects released in November 2021 and plans to make awards in Fiscal Year 2022.

Private Placement

- The BLM's goal is to place animals removed from overpopulated herds into good, private homes. Thanks to the help of its partners and innovative tools like the Adoption Incentive Program and the Online Corral, the BLM has doubled the rate of private care placement over the last five years compared to the previous five years.
- The BLM placed 7,793 animals into private care in FY2022. Animals adopted through the Adoption Incentive Program accounted for more than half of all adoptions – 3,742 animals.
- Since 1971, BLM has placed a total of nearly 290,000 animals into private care.
- The Adoption Incentive Program intends to increase the number of adoptions of untrained wild horses and burros by offering an incentive valued at up to \$1,000 to adopters to defray the costs of care, such as veterinary services, feed and training.
- In January 2022 the BLM implemented several improvements to the Adoption Incentive Program designed to enhance protections for animals adopted under the program. These changes include:
 - Requiring mandatory compliance inspections of animals within six months of adoption rather than the first year.
 - Title applications must be signed by a veterinarian or BLM authorized officer for the adopter to receive the incentive.
 - The incentive will now be made within 60 days after title date, rather than \$500 at time of adoption and \$500 at time of title.
 - The minimum adoption fee for AIP animals was increased from \$25 to \$125.
- The protections for animals adopted through the Adoption Incentive Program are layered upon existing protections which require adopters to certify under penalty of prosecution, that they will not knowingly sell or transfer the animal for slaughter or processing into commercial products. There is also a required 12-month waiting period before titling of adopted animals.

- The BLM’s partnership with the Mustang Heritage Foundation (MHF) continues to pay tremendous dividends as well, and the Online Corral adoption and sale platform continues to grow in popularity as it facilitates successful adoptions and sales all over the United States.

Off-Range Holding

- Historically, adoption demand has not been sufficient to place all excess wild horses and burros into private care through adoptions, sales, and transfers and therefore, private pasture and corral contracts have been acquired to care for the unadopted wild horses and burros.
- In any given year, the agency continues to seek the most cost-efficient off-range holding options – most recently adding space in Colorado, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

Integrated Resource Management

- Wild horses and burros are managed in the context of “multiple-use.” Planning and management decisions regarding wild horses and burros are made on the basis of detailed analyses of current and future conditions and varied resources and uses (e.g., water availability, Greater Sage-grouse, threatened and endangered species, fire impacts, livestock grazing, etc.)
- BLM interdisciplinary teams use an issues-based approach under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to identify resources likely to be impacted by wild horse and burro management actions and to analyze and mitigate those impacts.
- Each management scenario is unique and requires analysis specific to the location and conditions (e.g., available forage and water levels, fire history, drought, current wild horse and burro population size, range degradation, etc.).
- Just as wild horses and burros are not managed in isolation on the range, policies regarding wild horse and burro management are likewise developed in an integrated manner at the national/headquarters level. The Wild Horse and Burro Program works collaboratively with other Resource divisions, law enforcement, solicitor, ethics and administrative offices to ensure a multidisciplinary approach to inform policies and the decisions that flow from them.

Stakeholder Engagement, Education, Outreach

- The NEPA process invites and welcomes public input to inform management decisions. This process is conducted at the operational level. BLM field and district offices engage the public and targeted stakeholder groups through direct outreach and open forums during the planning process.
- Outside the NEPA process, BLM also engages interested public through such formal bodies as regional Resource Advisory Councils. Nationally, the Program seeks input on

policies and priorities through the Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board. That is a 9-member panel of citizens whose varied expertise represent different interests.

- Daily professional interactions occur between BLM representatives and a broad range of organizations with a resource- and wild horse and burro-management focus, including the Public Lands Council, Western Governors' Association, the Humane Society of the United States, the Free Roaming Equids and Ecosystem Sustainability Summit, university partners, and many more.
- The Program maintains a vibrant website and social media presence, as well as a fulltime Wild Horse and Burro National Information Center (866-468-7826; wildhorse@blm.gov).