U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

2023 Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin Wild Horse Gather Questions and Answers (for the Public and Media)

Q. What is the official name for this gather?

A. 2023 Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin Wild Horse Gather

Q. Why is this gather necessary?

A. This gather is necessary to maintain the wild horse population within the Appropriate Management Level (AML) and reduce population growth by treating mares to be released with a fertility control vaccine. This will ultimately prevent undue or unnecessary degradation of the BLM-managed public lands associated with excess wild horses and 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.

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

A. The BLM will gather approximately 220 wild horses and remove approximately 142 excess wild horses from in and around the Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin Herd Management Areas (HMAs) located in Owyhee County, Idaho. The Black Mountain and Hardtrigger HMAs are located southwest of Murphy and the Sands Basin HMA is located near Marsing.

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

A. Approximately 129 wild horses will remain in the Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin HMAs after the treated mares and selected studs are released.

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

A. Approximately 78 of the captured wild horses would be released; of these, about 38 would be mares treated with fertility control and about 40 would be stallions to maintain the proposed 50% male/50% female sex ratio and slow population growth. Stallion characteristics selected for release will maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and body type (conformation). Approximately four mares would be selected from other HMAs and released into the Black Mountain and Sands Basin HMAs to enhance herd genetics.

Q. When was the last time that AML was achieved in these HMAs?

A. The Sands Basin HMA is still within AML. However, the Hardtrigger HMA was within AML in 2022 and the Black Mountain HMA was within AML in 2019.

Q. What are the horses from the Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin HMAs like? What should I expect if I adopt one?

A. Feedback received by the BLM about adopted Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin HMA horses has been positive. Wild horses in the HMAs are descendants of domestic horses

that were released into the wild in the 1800s and early 1900s. For many years, residents captured the wild horses and bred them with a variety of private stock. Wild horses in the HMAs represent a variety of colors and coat patterns, including grey, bay, sorrel, black, buckskin and pinto. Adult horses in the HMAs weigh an average of 1,000 pounds and stand between 14 and 15.5 hands, with some individuals standing 16 hands and weighing over 1,200 pounds.

Q. Are there livestock grazing in this area?

A. There are 10 allotments that overlap with or are within the three HMAs, including: East Reynolds, Rabbit Creek/Peters Gulch, Hardtrigger, Reynolds Creek, Wildcat, Shares Basin, Elephant Butte, Bass FFR, Chipmunk FFR, and Sands Basin.

These allotments are currently under deferred or rest rotation grazing systems with use periods of spring, summer, fall and winter. Due to the nature of deferred and rest rotation systems there is variability in the number of livestock, season of use and Animal Unit Months (AUMs) per pasture.

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, 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-managed public lands has declined by nearly 50% since the 1940s; actual (as distinguished from authorized) livestock grazing on public rangelands has declined by 30% since 1971.

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

A. Yes, wild horse overpopulation impacts wildlife and plants. Plant communities within the HMAs are influenced by elevation, soil type and disturbance history (such as wildfire and grazing). Low elevations are typically sagebrush or saltbush with an understory of annual and perennial grasses. The higher elevations are typically sagebrush or bitterbrush with an understory of perennial grasses. (Common wildlife species within the Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin HMAs include sage-grouse, migratory birds, bighorn sheep, mule deer and pronghorn antelope. Redband trout (a BLM sensitive species) have also been documented in Jump, Reynolds, Salmon and Macks Creek.

Winter range is considered the limiting factor for both wild horses and big game in the HMAs; therefore, AML is based on forage availability during the winter months. When the combined use of big game, wild horses and livestock exceed the sustainable capacity of the landscape to provide winter habitat, resource conditions would be expected to decline. Over utilization would result in decreased forage availability and resource damage.

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 repeated grazing results in reduced plant health, vigor, reproduction, and ultimately in a loss of native forage species from natural plant communities. Over time, this diminishes habitat quality as abundance and the long-term production of desired plant communities is compromised.

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

A. Sage-grouse are dependent on sagebrush throughout the year, for both food and cover. In the winter, they need areas where sagebrush can be found growing above snow. In the nesting season, they need sagebrush for cover and food, grasses for nesting cover, and forbs for food and nesting cover. In late summer and fall, as the vegetation dries, they use riparian areas, springs, moist meadows, and higher elevations where they can find green forbs to eat. Wild horses primarily consume grasses but will also forage on green forbs and riparian vegetation so as horse populations increase so does their potential competition with sage-grouse. Yearlong use by wild horse populations above AML would increase trampling and grazing of riparian vegetation within the HMAs. Riparian vegetation would have reduced vigor and recruitment. The loss of stabilizing riparian vegetation coupled with increased hoof action on streambanks would lead to erosion and increase turbidity within riparian systems. The loss of riparian vegetation would also reduce shading and increase water temperature. Heavy utilization of upland vegetation (*i.e.*, perennial bunchgrasses) would lead to soil loss during overland flow events and increased sedimentation in riparian systems. These conditions would result in reduced survivorship and reproduction of Redband trout (BLM sensitive species).

Q. Why is the BLM removing horses when, as of June 2023, there are already over 59,000 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 continue to rise.

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 2023 Black Mountain, Hardtrigger and Sands Basin Wild Horse Gather will be transported to BLM Boise Off-Range Corral Facility, where they will be prepared for the BLM adoption and sales programs.

Q. What veterinary treatment will the removed horses receive?

A. The horses will be aged (based on the condition of their teeth), dewormed, vaccinated, blood-tested (for Equine Infectious Anemia), and freeze-marked (marked with a cold brand).

Q. How far, in relation to the trap site, are the horses and foals being herded?
A. That will be determined by the Lead Contracting Officer Representative (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 5 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.

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 more effectively 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. Unadopted horses are fed and cared for in either off-range corrals or off-range pastures. Wild horses more than 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. This process differs from adoption, in which 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.