



## **BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program On-Range Branch Highlights**

*National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board Meeting | Dec. 12-14, 2023*

The Wild Horse and Burro Program On-Range Branch is primarily responsible for coordinating management of wild horses and burros on BLM public lands, including advising the division chief on on-range management matters, developing and maintaining the annual gather and survey schedules, coordinating transport of animals, managing gather contracts and directing research efforts.

**Gathers/Removals:** In Fiscal Year 2023, the BLM removed a total of 5,335 wild horses and burros from overpopulated herds across the West as part of its efforts to achieve and maintain appropriate management levels. Efforts to conduct removals in Fiscal Year 2023 were impacted by budget limitations.

The BLM has identified approximately 20,000 wild horses and burros for removal in Fiscal Year 2024 focused on continuing recent efforts to reduce overpopulation in large herd management areas, including the Twin Peaks herd and the Marietta and Blue Wing complexes.

The BLM continues to prioritize animal well-being during all aspects of its management program, including during gather operations. During Fiscal Year 2023, the BLM conducted three internal assessments of gather operations to gauge compliance with standards outlined in the Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program. These assessments showed an average score of 97% compliant.

**Fertility Control:** The BLM continues to work towards implementing fertility control treatments where they can be effective at slowing wild horse and burro herd growth. In Fiscal Year 2023, the BLM completed 720 treatments, including continuing to increase the use of GonaCon-Equine, a longer-lasting vaccine treatment, along with continued use of 1-year PZP vaccine in some herds. Budgetary and logistical challenges in Fiscal Year 2023 impacted the BLM's fertility control efforts, which resulted in fewer treatments compared to fiscal years 2021 and 2022.

In Fiscal Year 2024, the BLM has identified 1,295 treatments. The BLM continues to implement [catch-treat-hold-release operations](#) to increase fertility control applications associated with gather operations.

Along with use of the PZP vaccines (ZonaStat-H, and PZP-22), the BLM has increased its use of the GonaCon-Equine vaccine since 2018. Peer-reviewed results show that GonaCon-Equine can cause 4 or more years of infertility in mares that later receive a booster dose of GonaCon-Equine. This is longer than the expected infertility for PZP-22 treated mares that later receive a booster dose of PZP vaccine.

**Notice of Funding Opportunity:** The BLM awarded cooperative agreements to six organizations and universities in Colorado, Oregon and Utah to support fertility control, public outreach and range improvement efforts. The organizations selected for awards were High Desert Strategies Fertility Control (OR), Piceance Mustangs (CO), Colorado State University, American Wild Horse Campaign (UT), Utah State Cooperative Extension, and Wild Horses of America Foundation. The projects were selected after a thorough review of proposals received through a [Notice of Funding Opportunity announced in 2022](#).

The BLM released an additional funding opportunity and request for proposals to [support new wild horse and burro research](#) on Nov. 1, 2023, which closes February 1, 2024. The BLM is seeking proposals that address any of the following priorities, which were identified in the [BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program 2021 Strategic Research Plan](#): 1) develop and/ or test fertility control methods that are safe, humane, and applicable to female wild horse (mares); 2) address ecological relationships between wild horses and burro and their environments, with studies that may also address the effects of climate change on wild horse and burro populations; or 3) studies that would further improve wild horse and burro aerial

censuses; develop new insights into wild horse and burro genetics; improve health, handling, and welfare; identify factors that improve horse and burro adoption rates; or address human dimensions of wild horse and burro management.

**Population Inventories:** Population estimates from reliable aerial surveys and ground counts are essential for herd monitoring and management decisions. The BLM aims to conduct reliable surveys of about 1/3 of the HMAs every year, on a rotating basis. In FY2023, the BLM used the statistically validated ‘simultaneous double-observer’ method of data recording in aerial surveys over 56 of the 177 herd management areas (HMAs) and 11 herd areas (HAs). In FY2023, infrared (IR) surveys were flown in 10 HMAs. Finally, in FY2023 there were also 3 ground-based surveys in HMAs where almost all the horses are individually catalogued and identifiable; in most of those HMAs, BLM works with and relies on help from volunteer groups to obtain those annual counts.

**Research:** In April 2023, the BLM issued a final EA, decision record, and finding of no significant impact authorizing two fertility control projects, which started in May 2023. One project will test the strength of immune response and contraceptive effects of various formulations of oocyte growth factor vaccines. The other project will test the efficacy of SpayVac PZP vaccine treatments given in the neck or gluteal muscles. The third project in that EA was not authorized; it would test the efficacy and behavioral outcomes of a type of intrauterine device. Since January 2023 the BLM is also supporting a project with *in vitro* and mouse model methods, to develop and test the contraceptive efficacy of ‘Juno-binding’ proteins that would prevent sperm from fertilizing eggs.

Since the fall of 2022 the BLM has been supporting two research projects that address WHB ecology and climate change. In one, the US Geological Survey will model the effects of wild horse and burro density, livestock use, and environmental covariates on wildlife and vegetation throughout the geographic range of BLM-managed wild horses and burros, then use those results to forecast the effects of future climate change. In the other, Utah State University and the USDA Agricultural Research Service will use environmental covariates and wild horse and burro locations from aerial surveys to model the quality of