

**Bureau of Land Management  
Northeast California Resource Advisory Council  
Subcommittee on Wild Horse and Burro Management**

**Summary Meeting Notes  
Wednesday, January 11, 2012, 9 a.m.  
Alturas, California**

RAC chair Nancy Huffman requested this meeting following her attendance at a public meeting hosted by the National Academy of Sciences in November 2011. The NAS is conducting an independent, technical evaluation of the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program, and invited public comments during the November meeting. Chairwoman Huffman wanted the Northeast California RAC to have an opportunity to review the issues under analysis by the NAS and have the opportunity to provide comments to the BLM.

These subcommittee comments will be provided to the full Northeast California RAC when they meet Feb. 8, 2012, in Redding, Calif.

**Attending**

RAC Chair Nancy Huffman, RAC subcommittee members Sean Curtis, Alan Cain, and Todd Swickard.

BLM Staff: Northern California District Manager Nancy Haug, Alturas Field Manager Tim Burke, Surprise Field Manager Allen Bollschweiler, District Public Affairs Officer Jeff Fontana.

Members of the public: Bill Phillips, Susanville; Ed Ward, Alturas.

By audio conference line: BLM California Wild Horse and Burro Program Manager Amy Dumas; members of the public: Jessica Johnston, Debbie Coffee, Elyse Gardner, Laura Leigh, Carol Abel, Deniz Bolbol, Sherry Oster, Billy Turner, Barbara Warner.

Nancy Haug explained the role and structure of the subcommittee. Information will be provided to the full RAC and then to the BLM for forwarding to the NAS as part of their study.

Nancy Huffman summarized her attendance at the NAS meeting in Reno. She suggested that the subcommittee work through the list of topic areas, indicate agreement or disagreement and any suggestions about additional areas to proceed.

Following is a summary of comments (not a verbatim record) by the subcommittee and members of the public. They are arranged by topic areas assigned to the NAS.

## Topics and Comments:

**1. *Estimates of the WH&B populations:*** Given available information and methods, how accurately can WH&B populations in the West be estimated? What are the best methods to estimate WH&B herd numbers and what is the margin of error in those methods? Are there better techniques than the BLM currently uses to estimate population numbers? For example, could genetics or remote sensing using unmanned aircraft be used to estimate WH&B population size and distribution?

### Comments:

Alan: Questioned the science behind using remote sensing for population surveys and how genetics factor in to population numbers. Remote sensing will not alleviate problems counting horses in difficult areas such as places with heavy tree cover.

Sean: Reasonableness and cost have to be factored in. What would we gain with remote sensing? We know we will never count every individual horse.

Todd: the population number is always changing and counts must consider annual die offs.

**2. *Population Modeling:*** Evaluate the strengths and limitations of the WinEquus population model for predicting impacts on wild horse populations given various stochastic factors and management alternatives. What types of decisions are most appropriately supported using the WinEquus model? Is there a better model (i.e. the HSUS model) the BLM should consider for future uses?

### Comments:

Nancy Huffman: This is where the genetics question applies. Each herd management area has its own distinct lifestyle.

Amy explained the WinEquus population model is used to predict population responses to various pressures. The BLM uses the model for wild horse population modeling. It is a useful planning tool to predict population responses. It is one of many tools used. It can be used to project when a herd may need to be considered for regathering after completion of a roundup. Amy noted it is a statistical model of population dynamics.

Sean: Before switching to a new model, the BLM should determine whether the WinEquus model is meeting needs. He does not have the capacity to fully analyze the effectiveness of WinEquus.

**3. *Genetic diversity in WH&B herds:*** What does information available on WH&B herds' genetic diversity indicate about long-term herd health, from a biological and genetic perspective? Is there an optimal level of genetic diversity within a herd to

*manage for? What management actions can be undertaken to achieve an optimal level of genetic diversity if it is too low?*

**Comments:**

Nancy Huffman: Information will be important to determine whether the BLM is dealing with truly wild horses, or horses that have been turned loose for various economic reasons.

Sean: Consider whether genetic information is more important for bands with Spanish blood versus those with lines to other origins.

Nancy Huffman: The best use would be to determine whether there is herd inbreeding.

**4. Annual rates of WH&B population growth:** *Evaluate estimates of the annual rates of increase in WH&B herds, including factors affecting the accuracy of and uncertainty related to the estimates. Is there compensatory reproduction as a result of gathers to remove excess WH&B or application of PZP-22 over a 4-year gather cycle, and if so, what is the level of compensatory reproduction occurring? Would WH&B populations self-limit if they were not controlled, and if so, what indicators (rangeland condition, animal condition, health, etc.) would be present at the point of self-limitation?*

**Comments:**

Sean: No large scale experiments are needed to try and prove the population will self-regulate. We know they will but there will be catastrophic rangeland havoc to habitat. We know that populations can self-limit, but it would be through starvation or dehydration.

Todd: Range health always has to be the BLM's primary concern.

In discussion, the committee members agreed that any attempts to allow wild herds to self-limit their populations would have negative impacts to animals and the range.

Sean: There is no evidence of compensatory reproduction. The BLM needs to focus on herd management on the ground.

**5. Predator impact on WH&B population growth:** *Evaluate information relative to the abundance of predators and their impact on WH&B populations. Although predator management is the responsibility of the USFWS or State wildlife agencies and given the constraints in existing federal law, is there evidence that predators alone could effectively control WH&B population size in the West?*

**Comments:**

Nancy Huffman: Has the California ban on mountain lion hunting has had an impact on wild horse populations in the state?

Sean: The question is an academic exercise only. Pursuing this question might not be the best use of funds.

6. **Population control:** *What scientific factors should be considered when making population control decisions (roundups, fertility control, sterilization of either males or females, sex ratio adjustments to favor males and other population control measures) relative to the effectiveness of control approach, herd health, genetic diversity, social behavior, and animal well-being?*

**Comments:**

Sean: The BLM may be off the mark is relying on a two-year effective fertility control measure for a long term tool at population management. Effective fertility control would need a long-lasting treatment. The RAC could suggest that NAS investigate longer-lasting methods of fertility control but he remains skeptical that such a long term drug will be developed.

Todd: Decisions need to be made based on existing technology.

Members discussed market considerations in drug development and whether BLM will contribute financially toward development.

Sean: Part of this discussion should include the effects of permanent sterilization, the effects of sex ratio structuring.

The group agreed the topic is an area that can have significant impacts on how herds are managed on the range.

7. **Immunocontraception of wild horse mares (*porcine zona pellucida*):** *Evaluate information related to the effectiveness of immunocontraception in preventing pregnancies and reducing herd populations. Are there other fertility control agents or population control methods the BLM should consider (for either mares or stallions)?*

**Comments:**

Nancy Huffman: A question must be addressed about how to fund an improved method or drug.

Sean: For the current drug to be effective, aggressive population control program would be needed.

**8. *Managing a portion of a population as non-reproducing:*** *What factors should the BLM consider when managing for WH&B herds with a reproducing and non-reproducing population of animals (i.e., a portion of the population is a breeding population and the remainder is non-reproducing males or females)? When implementing non-reproducing populations, which tools should be considered (geldings (castration), sterilized (spayed) mares or vasectomized stallions or other chemical sterilants)? Is there credible evidence to indicate vasectomized stallions in a herd would be effective in decreasing annual population growth rates, or are there other methods the BLM should consider for managing stallions in a herd that would be effective in tangibly suppressing population growth?*

**Comments:**

Committee agreement: The RAC needs to specifically request a look at whether there is a place on the range for non-reproducing herds. If there is, what are the parameters that would lead the BLM to taking that action? BLM should look into the cost effectiveness of that action.

**9. *AML Establishment or Adjustment:*** *Evaluate the BLM's approach to establishing or adjusting AML as described in the 4700-1 Wild Horses and Burros Management Handbook. Are there other approaches to establishing or adjusting AML the BLM should consider? How might BLM improve its ability to validate AML?*

**Comments:**

Committee agreement: Revisiting the topic might be important, but if the BLM agrees to this it should be sure it can be accomplished with existing workloads and staffing. AML adjustments can have longer term and broader consequences in terms of numbers of horses to be removed. Economic considerations need to be part of decision making on AML adjustment discussions. Consideration should also be given to impacts to range users.

**10. *Societal Considerations:*** *What options are available to BLM to address the widely divergent and conflicting perspectives about WH&B management and consider stakeholder concerns while using the best available science to protect land and animal health?*

**Comments:**

Todd: The BLM needs to recognize that using the best available science to protect land and animal health is the most important aspect of the program.

Sean: The question must be asked about dedication of resources to public access and transparency versus the need for resources to get the job done on the ground.

The amount of transparency that the BLM can provide can be limited by staff and financial resources, and locations of gathers. BLM needs to develop public access programs that fit locations.

**11. *Additional Research Needs:*** *Identify research needs and opportunities related to the topics listed above. What research should be the highest priority for the BLM to fill information and data gaps, reduce uncertainty, and improve decision-making and management?*

**Comments:**

Committee agreement: More knowledge is needed about a longer term contraceptive and an available stallion contraceptive. There is no alternative to helicopters (for gathering) at this point. We recognize there is more to learn but the BLM shouldn't put program on hold while we wait for additional information that may or may not be there. The program has to be aggressively moving forward. If the BLM learns something new or different, we can make a change.

Sean: If helicopter use is evaluated, BLM can't stop using them in the meantime.

Nancy Haug: Better information on movement of horses among HMA jurisdiction and inter-relationships among HMAs would be valuable.

Sean: The capacity of electronic monitoring should be more fully explored as a way of gaining more on the ground information on herd movement and other dynamics.

**Public Comments:**

Barbara Warner: There should be a strategic and independent count of wild horse and burro populations.

Bill Phillips: BLM is doing better at estimating populations than in earlier years. We have good ideas on numbers left on the range. Population modeling important component in structured herd management. Genetic diversity factors in to herd management by allowing the BLM to remove from herds undesirable traits. The number of foals taken by mountain lions has been underestimated and should be recognized. When herds achieve appropriate management levels, rangeland effects should be studied for five years (at that population level) before changes are made.

Ed Ward: The wild horse population increased after passage of the Act and the lack of ability for citizens to control numbers. He appreciates seeing horses in the wild. Mountain lions are taking a toll and wolves might be a factor as well. Wild horses and burros are the best friends you can ever have.

Debbie Coffee: Was shocked at some of the lack of knowledge from the subcommittee about wild horse management.

Deniz Bobbol: The law requires the BLM to complete census, and this work has been lacking by the BLM. Lack of knowledge leads to genetic problems and can lead to herds being zeroed out because they are not healthy. BLM needs to do a better job of census and needs more knowledge on herd makeup. WinEquus is 20 years old. She was shocked by the committee chair voicing concern over cost of fertility control, when the NAS discussed the financial long term advantage of fertility control. Non reproducing herds would be a violation of the Act. Releasing sterile horses also violates the Act. The subcommittee did not address the foundation of the BLM program. The NAS does not address this foundation either. The allocation of AUMS needs to be part of the discussion. Subcommittee members need to know how the public resources are allocated and need more complete information on herd areas.

Laura Leigh: Thanked the group for acknowledging the need for more information on herd dynamics and movement. She encouraged the subcommittee to understand that the recommendations apply program wide, not just to the field offices here. There is an extraordinary lack of data in many BLM field offices. She said Kiger management should not be used as a model for other herds. The Kiger horses have been intensively managed and is almost a range breeding program. There is population modeling software that can be modified and might be a good replacement for WinnEquus. There is good information available to the NAS about compensatory reproduction. There is no NAS protocol for incorporating this type of dialogue (being provided at today's meeting). Public access is not part of the NAS study. The committee members do not seem to recognize that the BLM has responsibility for the animals and the land. Wild horses are unique in the structure of the BLM.

Elyse Gardner: Was troubled by the lack of information that the subcommittee has, but thanked them for service. She said everyone needs to make an effort to remember the law and not address the issue on personal preferences. She referenced section 2 of the WHB Act as the definition of wild horses and burros. There is good scientific information to support compensatory reproduction. She encouraged the subcommittee members to admit then they don't know something and be willing to learn more. The NAS study needs to include livestock grazing ratios. The Wild Horse and Burro Program needs to address minimal feasible management and resource allocations. The law was meant to protect the animals because they were fast disappearing from the land. The BLM needs to protect family units, as it has in the Pryor Mountains -- gather and release by bands.

Jesica Johnston: Expressed concern with subcommittee making recommendations without being fully informed on the science regarding wild horse and burro management. Burros were not mentioned in this discussion and have equal protection. The direct count census technique is outdated. There are better and more cost effective methods and NAS should investigate. Line transect is one. Viewing predators as a problem stems from the livestock industry bias for predator control. The BLM should remove livestock from public lands where wild horses live to return to a more ecosystem restoration approach. There is research available that is not being used in the program. For example, there are

papers written on the misclassification of wild horses as a non-native species. Take a step back and take another look at the land allocated to wild horses and burros.

Carol Abel: Is disappointed in knowledge base of the subcommittee members.

Sherry Oster: Karen Susman of the American Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros has done research on PZP and intact wild herds. ASPMB. She is concerned with management impact on wild herds family structure.

**Continuing discussion:**

There is a question about data system compatibility. Can BLM access information developed by others?

Sean: The NAS should investigate whether there are better ways to spend allocated dollars. We are currently keeping the long term pastures full and the range full. A long term model would address the effects of aggressively getting to low AML and staying there. The BLM will not see a cost decrease with the current model because we continue to fill up long term holding. Getting the on the range population down and keeping it down reduces gather and holding needs and therefore program costs, after an initial increase in holding costs. This is an important part of the socio economic question to be addressed. Ensure socio economic and research projected long term to determine the long term effect of reaching AML.

Todd: Long term contraceptive is a key to management into the future and should be encouraged by the BLM.

The Northeast California Resource Advisory Council will receive these meeting notes and consider whether to forward them as a RAC recommendation to the BLM.

*Summary notes compiled by:  
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