

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

Finding of No Significant Impact

DOI-BLM-CA-N070-2011-04-EA

HIGH ROCK COMPLEX

**(BITNER, FOX HOG, HIGH ROCK, NUT MOUNTAIN
and WALL CANYON HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS)**

WILD HORSE POPULATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

August 15, 2011



**Allen Bollschweiler
Field Manager
Surprise Field Office
602 Cressler Street
Cedarville, CA 96104
(530) 279-6101**

Surprise Field Office / California



BACKGROUND

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Surprise Field Office is proposing to implement a population management operation for wild horses in order to achieve desired population levels within the Bitner, Fox-Hog, High Rock, Nut Mountain, and Wall Canyon Herd Management Areas (HMAs), and to remove wild horses from adjacent public lands outside of these designated HMAs. The five HMAs and adjacent areas are referred to as the High Rock Complex. Implementation of this proposal would entail gathering and removing excess horses from four HMAs (Bitner, Fox-Hog, High Rock, and Wall Canyon) and potentially adding horses to one HMA (Nut Mountain). The Proposed Action evaluated under EA # DOI-BLM-CA-N070-2011-04 analyzed the potential impacts to the human environment of removing excess wild horses from the Complex and/or return wild horses to the Complex, in order to manage population levels consistent with the established appropriate management levels (AMLs), and to slow the current growth rate of wild horses.

Current population inventories and estimates indicate that in 2011 there are approximately 1,326 wild horses within and adjacent to the HMAs. Of these, there are approximately 934 wild horses within the Bitner, Fox-Hog, High Rock, Nut Mountain, and Wall Canyon HMAs, and approximately 392 wild horses on public and private lands outside of the HMAs. Wild horse numbers have increased an average of 17% to 23% per year since the HMAs were last gathered in 2006 and 2007. Consumption of forage by wild horses in 2011 exceeds the amount of forage allocated to them in established AMLs within HMAs by 173% to 400%, with an average of 334%.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based upon the review of EA # DOI-BLM-CA-N070-2011-04, and its associated administrative record, it is my determination that the implementation of the Proposed Action will not have environmental impacts beyond those described in EA #DOI-BLM-CA-N070-2011-04. The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Surprise Resource Management Plan (RMP), 2008, and the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area RMP, 2004. I have determined that the Proposed Action is not a major federal action, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. For these reasons an environmental impact statement or a supplement to the existing environmental assessment does not need to be prepared.

CONTEXT AND INTENSITY

This finding is based on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and to the intensity of the impacts described in the EA or as articulated in the letters of comment.

Context: The project is a site-specific action which by itself does not have international, national, regional, or state-wide importance.

Intensity: The following discussion is based on the relevant factors that should be considered in evaluating intensity as described in 40 CFR 1508.27:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

I have determined that none of the direct, indirect or cumulative impacts associated with Alternative A are significant, individually or combined. The Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluated beneficial and adverse impacts of the gather and removal of wild horses. Potential adverse impacts include injuries to wild horses from capture, processing, transfer and holding; and effects to the populations through changes in herd population dynamics, age structure or sex ratio, and subsequently to the growth rates and population size over time. Other short term adverse impacts include disturbance to soils and vegetation within gather sites and temporary holding facilities, and short term visual and noise impacts to recreational use of Wilderness Areas (EA Sections 4.2, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 4.12). Managing wild horses would beneficially reduce the level of use of rangeland and riparian vegetation, and help alleviate competition for resources between wildlife and wild horses. Managing excess wild horses will allow for the recovery of natural resources, such as soils, vegetation, watersheds, wildlife, and wild horse habitat. However, none of these impacts would be significant at the local scale or cumulatively.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

The Proposed Action is located within a very remote setting with little human habitation. The Wild Horse and Burro Standard Operating Procedures (EA, Appendix A) would be used to conduct the gather and are designed to protect human health and safety, as well as the health and safety of wild horses. The Proposed Action would have minimal affect to public health or safety.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The High Rock Complex contains many unique and important biological, geological, scenic, and cultural resources. These include several important archaeological sites, one National Conservation Area, three Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, three Wilderness Areas, one Wilderness Study Area, and one National Historic Trail. The EA analyzed the impacts associated with implementation of the Proposed Action to these unique areas. Wild horse gather activities are designed to be minimally intrusive and would result in no permanent surface disturbance or impacts to these sites or to their associated values. A cultural resources inventory would be completed prior to constructing temporary trap sites and holding facilities. If cultural resources are found in an area, a new location would be found to set up temporary trap sites.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Effects of the gather are well known and understood. No unresolved issues were raised following public notification of the proposed gather. This is demonstrated through the effects analysis in the EA.

5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

Gather operations for wild horses similar to the Proposed Action in Alternative A have been occurring throughout northeastern California BLM Field Offices and elsewhere within California and Nevada for the past several decades. The effects of these treatments have resulted in a fairly consistent (beneficial) outcome to wild horses and to biological and cultural resources. The analysis provided in the attached EA does not indicate that this action would involve any unique or unknown risks.

6. *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

Future projects occurring within the High Rock Complex would be evaluated through the appropriate NEPA process and analyzed under a site-specific NEPA document. The Proposed Action does not set a precedent for future actions.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.*

Cumulative effects expected would include continued improvement of upland and riparian vegetation conditions, which would in turn benefit permitted livestock, native wildlife, and wild horses as forage (habitat) quantity and quality is improved over the current level (EA Sections 4.1, 4.7.3, 4.8.3, 4.10.3).

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

The High Rock Complex contains several important archaeological sites, some of which are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Prior to implementation of the Proposed Action outlined in Alternative A, a complete cultural resources survey of the treatment areas will occur. This survey will identify cultural sites, and these will be flagged and avoided during treatment (EA Sections 3.5, 4.4.1). The gather and removal of excess wild horses would result in beneficial impacts to sites that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by reducing trampling damage from wild horses.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

There are no threatened or endangered plants or animals known to occur within the project or the surrounding area. Sage-grouse, a federal candidate species, and a BLM sensitive species, are known to occur within the High Rock Complex. Sage-grouse habitat is an issue

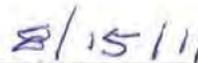
discussed and analyzed within the EA in Sections 3.10 *Special Status Plants*, 3.13 *Wildlife Habitat*, and Sections 4.9.1 *Effects of Special Status Plants*, and 4.11 *Effects on Native Wildlife and Sage-steppe Habitats*. The Proposed Action will improve sage-grouse habitat within the project area, as it will reduce heavy utilization and trampling of riparian/wetland areas, and will improve the condition of native perennial vegetative communities.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, or local law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where nonfederal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.

The Proposed Action does not violate any known federal, state, or local law, or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.



Allen Bollschweiler
Field Manager



Date