

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

**Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2015-0023**

West Douglas Herd Area
Wild Horse Gather

January 2015
Proposed Action for Public Scoping

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Northwest District
White River Field Office
220 East Market St
Meeker, CO 81641



BLM

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Identifying Information

Project Title: West Douglas Herd Area Wild Horse Gather Plan

Legal Description: 6th Principal Meridian, Rio Blanco County, Colorado

Township 1 North, Range 101 West, Section 31
Township 1 North, Range 102 West, Sections 34 – 36
Township 1 South, Range 101 West, Sections 6, 7, 18 – 20, 28, 29, 33
Township 1 South, Range 102 West, Sections 1 – 4, 8 – 36
Township 1 South, Range 103 West, Sections 9 – 36
Township 1 South, Range 104 West, Sections 12 – 15, 22 – 27, 34 - 36
Township 2 South, Range 101 West, Sections 4 – 9, 16 – 21, 28 - 33
Township 2 South, Range 102 West, Sections All
Township 2 South, Range 103 West, Sections All
Township 2 South, Range 104 West, Sections 1 – 3, 10 -15, 22 – 27, 34 – 36
Township 3 South, Range 101 West, Sections 5 – 7, 18, 19
Township 3 South, Range 102 West, Sections All
Township 3 South, Range 103 West, Sections All
Township 3 South, Range 104 West, Sections 1 – 3, 10 -15, 22 – 27, 34 - 36
Township 4 South, Range 102 West, Sections 1 - 30
Township 4 South, Range 103 West, Sections 1 - 30
Township 4 South, Range 104 West, Sections 1 – 3, 10 -15, 22 – 27, 34 - 36

Applicant: Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, White River Field Office

NEPA Document Number: DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2015-0023-EA

1.2. Background

The gather area (analysis area) is larger than the West Douglas Herd Area (WDHA) because it includes areas/lands to the south and west of the WDHA where wild horses have relocated outside of the WDHA. The gather area is located entirely within Rio Blanco County, approximately 50 miles west and south of Meeker, Colorado and approximately 50 miles north of Grand Junction, Colorado. The predominant land uses within the gather area are livestock grazing, recreation and energy development that began around the 1940s with minimal recent development. The gather area comprises approximately 229,276 acres (206,265 acres of public and 23,011 acres of private) which is approximately 13 percent of all of the lands within the White River Field Office (WRFO) boundary. The WDHA itself comprises about 123,387 acres of public and 4,754 acres of private lands. The map for the gather area (including the WDHA) is located in Appendix A, Figure 1.

The most recent inventory of the WDHA, conducted in February 2012, found that there are approximately 154 excess wild horses within the WDHA. With an estimated foal crop of 20 percent and less the 20 wild horses that were gathered in the summer of 2013 due to lack of water, the population could reach 291 animals by 2015. Further, the February 2012 inventory accounted for 36 excess wild horses adjacent to the WDHA. With an estimated foal crop of 20 percent, the population of wild horses outside of the WDHA could reach 74 animals by 2015.

The history of wild horses in the WDHA has been summarized in *Wild Horse Management History and Current Conditions within the West Douglas Herd Area, January 2015* (available online at http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/wrfo/wrfo_wild_horse_and.html). This history document has outlined how the wild horses that reside in the WDHA or areas adjacent to the WDHA are impacting the landscape and the ability to maintain a thriving, natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship in the area.

After a careful review of the WDHA history document and the current land use plan, the WRFO Field Manager concluded that all wild horses within or adjacent to the WDHA meet the statutory definition of excess animals, and therefore, consistent with the authority provided in 16 USC § 1333 (b) (2), the BLM shall immediately remove excess animals from the range and is requesting such action take place under the “West Douglas Herd Area Review of Current Situation” Information Memorandum dated January 2015. Gather and removal operations shall be conducted until all excess animals have been removed in order to restore a thriving natural ecological balance and protect the range from deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild horses.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has determined that all of the wild horses that reside within the WDHA and adjacent lands are excess animals that require removal in order to comply with existing Land Use Planning decisions set forth in the White River Resource Management Plan (Record of Decision, July 1997), and reaffirmed in the West Douglas Herd Area Amendment to the White River Resource Management Plan (Record of Decision October 10, 2007).

This Environmental Assessment (EA) specifically considers the methods to be used to gather excess wild horses that reside in or adjacent to the WDHA. The BLM is preparing this EA to disclose and analyze the environmental consequences of the methods used to gather excess wild horses in the WDHA in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

1.3. Purpose and Need for Action

This EA is a site-specific analysis of potential impacts that could result with the implementation of the Proposed Action or the alternatives to the Proposed Action.

Based on existing inventories inside and outside the WDHA, the BLM has identified a need to take action to protect the other resources, including wildlife habitat, livestock grazing, soil, water

and vegetation resources. Therefore, the purpose for this action is to remove all excess wild horses that reside in or adjacent to the WDHA in accordance with The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 and land use planning decisions.¹ In accordance with 16 USC § 1332 (f) "excess animals" means wild free-roaming horses or burros which must be removed from an area in order to preserve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship in that area and to manage wild horses within designated management areas.

The need for this action is after the review of *Wild Horse Management History and Current Conditions within the West Douglas Herd Area (January 2015)*, inventories, the White River Resource Management Plan and all applicable Resource Management Plan Amendments, any existing court ordered EISs, and other information in accordance with The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, as amended the BLM has determined that excess wild horses exist on the public lands within and adjacent to WDHA requiring they be gathered and removed.

1.4. Decision to be Made

Upon completion of this EA, the Authorized Officer (AO) will make a determination as to whether any "significant" impacts could result from the implementation of these actions. "Significance" is defined by NEPA and is found in regulation 40 CFR 1508.27. An EA provides evidence necessary to determine whether a significant impact exists. If the BLM determines that the proposal would result in a "significant" impact, then the BLM would prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project. If the AO determines that this project does not have "significant" impacts following the analysis, then the BLM will prepare and sign a "Finding of No Significant Impact" and Decision Record which implements the agency's selected alternative.

Based on the analysis contained in this EA, the BLM will decide whether to approve or deny the Proposed Action to begin to gather and remove excess wild horses from within and adjacent to the WDHA, and if so, under what terms and conditions. Under the NEPA, the BLM must determine if there are any significant environmental impacts associated with the Proposed Action.

The objective of the action is to remove excess wild horses from within and outside the WDHA so that a thriving ecological balance is maintained. The AO will select the alternative that best allows the BLM to meet this objective.

The Field Manager is the responsible officer who will decide one of the following:

- To approve specific types of gather methods and design features to gather and remove all excess wild horses that reside within or adjacent to the WDHA;

¹ 16 U.S.C. §1333(b)(2)

- To approve specific types of gather methods and design features to gather excess wild horses that reside within or adjacent to the WDHA but to remove excess wild horses in a phased approach based on age and sex;
- To analyze the effects of gather and removal operations in an EIS; or
- To deny wild horse gather and removal operations within or adjacent to the WDHA.

1.5. Conformance with the Land Use Plan

The Proposed Action is subject to and in conformance with the following plan (43 CFR 1610.5-3(a), BLM 1617.3):

Name of Plan: White River Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan (WRRMP).

Date Approved: July 1, 1997

Decision Number/Page: Page 2-26, *Wild Horse Management*, “The North Piceance and West Douglas Herd Areas will be managed in the short-term (0-10 years) to provide forage for a herd of 0 – 50 wild horses in each herd area. The long term objective (+10 years) will be to remove all wild horses from these areas.”

Name of Plan: West Douglas Herd Area Amendment (WDHAA) to the White River Resource Management Plan, Environmental Assessment CO-WRFO-05-083-EA

Date Approved: October 10, 2007

In 2005, the BLM revisited its planning decisions to remove all wild horses in the herd area. The State Director found that BLM could not maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship outside of the designated Piceance/East Douglas Herd Management Area. That portion of the State Director’s decision reads as follows:

After extensive analysis and public input, the BLM concluded that a self-sustaining population of healthy wild horses could not be maintained within the West Douglas Herd Area in balance with their habitat and other uses, within the bounds of where wild horses existed in 1971, and with the minimum level of management needed to achieve land use plan objectives.

The State Director then found that wild horses within the White River Field Office’s management area could be better managed within the designated Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area:

Intensive management would be required to maintain genetic viability of the herd, provide adequate horse habitat and suitable conditions for other competing uses, keep the horses within the boundaries of the management area, and to carry-out horse gathers in the localized rough terrain. For these reasons, BLM concluded that wild horses could be better managed within the adjacent Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area.

Relationship between the Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area and West Douglas Herd Area Gathers

The BLM's National Wild Horse and Burro Program has determined there is space available in short-term or long-term holding facilities for excess wild horses which may be removed from Colorado in Fiscal Year 2015. All wild horse gathers are subject to funding approval and further based on availability of short-term and/or long-term holding facilities. Within the WRFO, the priority would be to remove excess wild horses from within and adjacent to the West Douglas Herd Area (WDHA). However, if it becomes difficult to gather excess wild horses from the area, the WRFO would gather excess wild horses from within and adjacent the Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area (PEDHMA). Gather of any wild horses within the PEDHMA is contingent upon whether or not (and if so, how many) excess wild horses are gathered and removed from the WDHA. However, due to differences between the PEDHMA and the WDHA, the WRFO is conducting separate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews for the two proposed gathers (DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2015-0024-DNA [which is tiered to DOI-BLM-CO-110-2011-0058-EA] and DOI-BLM-CO-N05-2015-0023-EA, respectively). The proposed gather in PEDHMA is for a specified number of excess wild horses and would be proposed to be conducted during September 2015 using helicopter drive trapping or helicopter assisted roping. The PEDHMA is the only area identified in the WRFO for management of wild horses. In contrast, the WDHA is not identified in the RMP for management of wild horses and the proposed gather would be conducted over a period of several years using a variety of gather techniques including helicopter drive trapping, helicopter assisted roping, and bait and water trapping. To make sure that the WRFO's gather plans for excess wild horses are clearly understood by the public, both of the NEPA reviews will be made available for public scoping and review at the same time.

2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

2.1. Scoping

NEPA regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) require that the BLM use a scoping process to identify potential significant issues in preparation for impact analysis. The principal goals of scoping are to identify issues, concerns, and potential impacts that require detailed analysis. Scoping is both an internal and external process.

Internal scoping was initiated when the project was presented to the White River Field Office (WRFO) interdisciplinary team on December 16, 2014. External scoping was conducted from January 30, 2015 until February 14, 2015. This project was posted on the BLM's on-line National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) register (ePlanning) and the public was informed via a news release. Informational letters regarding scoping for the Preliminary EA were sent to interested parties on January 30, 2015.

2.2. Public Comment

The Preliminary EA will be available for a 30-day public review and comment period in Spring 2015.

3. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

This chapter describes the Proposed Action and alternatives, including any that were considered but eliminated from detailed analysis. The BLM has developed four alternatives which will be considered in detail:

- Alternative A – Proposed Action - Use all approved gather methods
- Alternative B – Exclusive use of bait and/or water trapping
- Alternative C - Use all approved gather methods but remove wild horses in a phased approach based on age and sex
- Alternative D – No Action Alternative.

For a detailed description of the gather described in the alternatives, refer to Appendix D - Standard Operating Procedures (WO- IM-2013-059). The gather and removal of excess wild horses would be completed by a BLM Wild Horse and Burro (WH&B) National Program Contractor and/or BLM personnel.

Note: All Washington Office Instruction Memorandums (WO IMs) can be found online (http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/info/regulations/Instruction_Memos_and_Bulletins/national_instruction.html).

3.1. Alternative A (Proposed Action): Use All Approved Gather Methods

Under Alternative A (Proposed Action), the BLM would use all approved gather methods (either individually or in various combinations) to remove all excess wild horses from areas within and adjacent to the WDHA. Gather operations would continue as needed until all excess wild horses are gathered and removed from areas within and adjacent to the WDHA.

The gather and removal of excess wild horses would be completed by a BLM Wild Horse and Burro (WH&B) National Program Contractor and/or BLM personnel. The types of approved gather methods include:

1. Helicopter drive-trapping: involves using a helicopter to spot and then herd wild horses towards a pre-constructed trap. Traps would be pre-constructed utilizing portable, round-pipe steel panels with funnel-shaped wings made up of jute fabric affixed to T-posts that have been temporarily tamped into the ground to create a visual barrier so that as the wild horses are hazed by the helicopter towards the trap through the “wings” or funnel so that the wild horses ultimately end up in the trap where people on-the-ground shut a gate behind them in order to catch them in the trap. In general, most traps would be estimated to be 1 – 5 acres in size. Trap locations would be situated in areas where previously used trap sites were located or other disturbed areas whenever possible. Trap locations are chosen for safety of maneuvering the wild horses into the trap, as well as, to gather the wild horses located in a given area. Helicopter drive-trapping would not be conducted between the dates of March 1 and June 30 which are considered to be the peak foaling period (Washington Office (WO) Instruction Memorandum (IM) 2010-183). The BLM Wild Horse and Burro Handbook, H-4700-1, Section 4.4.4 prohibits the capture of wild horses by helicopter during peak foaling periods.
2. Helicopter assisted roping: includes herding by helicopter towards ropers who rope the wild horse(s). Once roped, another rider rides alongside the roped wild horse and roper, helping to haze, or herd, the roped wild horse either towards the trap or towards a stock trailer. Once at the trap the rope is flipped away from the roped wild horse’s neck and it joins the rest of the trapped wild horses. No helicopter assisted roping would be conducted between the dates of March 1 and June 30 due to the BLM’s policy which prohibits the capture of wild horses by helicopter during peak foaling periods. Several factors such as animal condition, herd health, weather conditions, or other considerations could result in adjustments in the schedule. Helicopter gathers in subsequent years would likely be scheduled for a similar duration between July 1 and February 28.
3. Water trapping: utilizes a trap constructed of portable, round-pipe steel panels. Funnel-shaped traps are built allowing wild horses to get deep into the trap so that the gate release mechanism has time to close. Water traps are located at a specific water source. Water trapping may be conducted at any time of year.
4. Bait trapping: utilizes a trap constructed of portable, round-pipe steel panels. Funnel-shaped traps are built which allow wild horses to get deep into the trap so that the gate release mechanism has time to close. Bait traps would be located in areas frequented by wild horses so that the horses make use of the provided forage (quality, weed free hay). Bait trapping may be conducted at any time of year.

For 2015, gather operations, if approved, would be tentatively scheduled for September 14 – 25, 2015 (approximately 11 days). Several factors such as animal health, weather conditions, or other considerations could result in adjustments in the schedule. The use of helicopters in subsequent years would likely be scheduled for a similar duration between July 1 and February 28.

3.2. Alternative B: Exclusive Use of Bait and/or Water Trapping

Exclusive use of bait and/or water trapping utilizes a trap constructed of portable, round-pipe steel panels. Funnel-shaped traps would be built, allowing wild horses to get deep into the trap so that the gate release mechanism has time to get the gate close. Water traps would be located at a specific water source. Bait traps would be located in areas frequented by wild horses so that the wild horses would make use of the forage that is provided as bait. Water and/or bait trapping may be conducted at any time in the year. The exact locations of such bait and/or water trapping have not been determined at this time but these locations would be selected based on current wild horse use of an area and/or a given water source.

3.3. Alternative C: Use All Approved Gather Methods but Remove Wild Horses in a Phased Approach Based on Age and Sex

Alternative C is similar to Alternative A except all stallions over three years of age would be returned to the WDHA until the point when the sex ratio of gathered wild horses is 80 percent stallions and 20 percent dry mares, and/or mare/foal pairs, and stallions younger than three years of age. The BLM would then begin removing stallions over three years of age along with any of the dry mares, and/or mare foal pairs, and stallions younger than three years of age until the time that the 80/20 percent is reached all mares, foals, and stallions three years old or younger would be gathered and removed from the WDHA. No stallions would be gelded that are returned to the WDHA. No mares or mare/foal pairs would be returned to the WDHA so there would be no need for the treatment of mares with porcine zona pellucida (PZP).

For the gather operation that could be conducted in 2015, approximately 167 excess wild horses would be removed. It is currently estimated that approximately 183 of the total estimated wild horses that are located in the WDHA or adjacent to the WDHA area would be dry mares or mares with a foals at their side. Further, it is estimated that approximately another 36 wild horses would be stallions three years of age or younger. If this gather is carried out, and is successful, 167 dry mares, mare/foal pairs and/or stallions three years of age or younger would be removed from the WDHA or adjacent areas. Even if the proposed gather operation is fully successful this would leave approximately 208 wild horses within or adjacent to the WDHA to be gathered and removed in the future not including a population increase. With the removal of more mares from the herd it is expected that the reproductive rate would be reduced to less than the 20 percent that currently takes place.

Because the BLM has limited ability to place wild horses within holding facilities because most facilities are at or near capacity, the purpose of a phased approach to removing excess wild horses based on age and sex is to slow the reproductive rate of the remaining population of excess wild horses within or adjacent to the WDHA and to capitalize on BLM's ability to adopt the younger horses versus placement in short-term or long-term holding facilities.

3.4. Design Features for Alternatives Involving Helicopters (Alternatives A and C)

1. Avoid, if possible, helicopter gather operations from late-August through November for high public use areas during big game hunting seasons.
2. CPW staff would be contacted to coordinate gather operations in an effort to develop mutually compatible strategies that may reduce the intensity and localize the expanse of helicopter-related disturbances during big game hunting seasons.
3. The Contractor must operate in compliance with Federal Aviation Regulations, Part 91. Pilots provided by the Contractor shall comply with the Contractor's Federal Aviation Certificates and applicable regulations of the State in which the gather is located.
4. Aviation fueling operations will be conducted a minimum of 1,000 feet from wild horses in traps or temporary holding facilities.
5. All refueling will occur on existing roads or a site approved by the BLM as a helicopter staging area. All approved staging areas will be a minimum of 200 feet from any riparian area or stream channel. The operator could utilize absorbent pads while refueling to limit the potential of fuel spills. In the event of a spill of lubricant, hydraulic fluids, fuels, or other hydrocarbons will be reported to the BLM's Contracting Officer Representative (COR) or Project Inspector (PI) so that BLM can immediately conduct evaluations of any necessary clean-up actions, as well as perform such actions to ensure compliance with applicable Laws, Rules, and regulations.

3.5. Design Features Common to All Gather Alternatives (Alternatives A, B, and C)

1. Gather operations would be recurring until all excess wild horses are gathered and removed from areas within and adjacent to the WDHA.
2. The BLM would provide the public/media with safe and transparent visitation at wild horse gather operation in accordance with WO-IM-2013-058. The BLM would conduct gather operations while ensuring the humane treatment of wild horses in accordance with

WO-IM 2013-059. A schedule would be prepared and posted on the WRFO's website (<http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/wrfo.html>) that would outline specific viewing opportunities and other relevant information. The BLM would provide concise, accurate and timely information about gather operations with communication and reporting during the course of an ongoing wild horse gather in accordance with WO-IM 2013-061.

3. The WRFO would utilize the Incident Command System (ICS) to enable safe, efficient, and successful wild horse gather operations in accordance with WO-IM-2013-060.
4. The BLM would not construct trap locations or temporary holding facilities within 200 meters of known occupied habitat for listed plant species. If trap sites are anticipated in potential or suitable habitat or within an ACEC (Lower Greasewood Creek, Upper Greasewood Creek, Yanks Gulch/Upper Greasewood Creek, Coal Draw, Oil Spring Mountain, East Douglas Creek, South Cathedral Creek, Duck Creek, Ryan Gulch or Dudley Bluffs) that have not been previously disturbed, 24 hours of notification would be required and a pre-survey for special status plant species would be conducted prior to mobilization of vehicles and equipment by a BLM plant specialist. If BLM Sensitive plant species or federally listed plant species are located, another site would be selected at a distance greater at least 200 meters from the edge of the population or occurrence and pre-surveyed similarly, as necessary.
5. A veterinarian from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) or licensed contract veterinarian would be at the gather or consulted, as needed, to examine animals and make recommendations to the BLM for care and treatment of the gathered wild horses. Decisions to humanely euthanize animals in field situations would be made in conformance with BLM policy #WO-IM-2009-041.
6. Contractors and/or BLM would utilize trailers to transport gathered wild horses to a temporary holding facility where they would receive appropriate food and water. Holding facilities and gather sites have historically been located on both public and private lands due to road access and availability of water and may be located on such lands again during proposed gather operations.
7. Removed wild horses would mostly likely be transported to the Canon City, Colorado BLM holding facility where they would be prepared (freeze-marked, vaccinated, and dewormed) for adoption, sale (with limitations), or long-term holding unless unforeseen circumstances warranted that the wild horses be transported to a different approved BLM holding facility (i.e. at Rock Springs, Wyoming).
8. There is no proposal to hold a wild horse adoption at the temporary holding facility upon completion of a gather because of current market conditions. However, if determined that an adoption is warranted the BLM may hold an adoption offering approximately 10 wild horses with a date to be decided upon and advertised.

9. Any discovery of hazardous or potentially hazardous materials would be reported to the BLM hazardous materials coordinator and Law Enforcement for investigation.
10. Any hay fed at trap sites or holding facilities, on public lands, would be certified as weed free. Any noxious weeds that establish as a result of the proposed action would be controlled by the BLM. All of the trap locations would be monitored for up to three years for weed species infestation following gather operations. If discovered, the BLM would treat these locations following procedures outlined in DOI-BLM-CO-110-2010-0005-EA (http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/BLM_Information/nepa/wrfo/FY_2010.html). It is estimated that the total acreage affected would be less than 50 acres.
11. Trap locations and holding areas would be sited to avoid cultural resources. In areas with acceptable levels of inventory no additional field work should be necessary except to ensure that sites in the near vicinity can be adequately avoided by drive lines, wing fences and traps. In areas where inadequate inventory data exists an inventory would be conducted to ensure that any resources present are avoided.
12. Known and reported fossil localities would be avoided when locating trap sites and associated wing fences and holding facilities. Sites without adequate inventory data would need to be examined for the presence of fossils during trap site selection activities. Trap facilities would be modified to avoid impacting identified fossil resources.
13. All of the trap locations would be monitored for up to three years for vegetation recovery. If problems with vegetation establishment are discovered, BLM would treat these locations based on the aid in vegetation recovery that may be necessary, i.e. broadcast seeding, at the trap locations. It is estimated that approximately 50 acres would be affected for what would be considered the life of the gather and removal efforts.
14. The BLM is responsible for informing all persons who are associated with the project that they would be subject to prosecution for knowingly disturbing archaeological sites or for collecting artifacts.
15. If any archaeological materials are discovered as a result of operations under this authorization, activity in the vicinity of the discovery will cease, and the WRFO Archaeologist will be notified immediately. Work may not resume at that location until approved by the AO. The BLM would make every effort to protect the site from further impacts including looting, erosion, or other human or natural damage until BLM determines a treatment approach, and the treatment is completed. Unless previously determined in treatment plans or agreements, the BLM would evaluate the cultural resources and, in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), select the appropriate mitigation option within 48 hours of the discovery. The BLM would implement the mitigation in a timely manner. The process would be fully documented in reports, site forms, maps, drawings, and photographs. The BLM would forward documentation to the SHPO for review and concurrence.

16. Pursuant to 43 CFR 10.4(g), the BLM would immediately upon the discovery of human remains, funerary items, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony stop activities in the vicinity of the discovery and protect it for 30 days or until notified to proceed by the AO.
17. The BLM would be responsible for informing all persons who are associated with gather operations that they would be subject to prosecution for disturbing or collecting vertebrate or other scientifically-important fossils, collecting large amounts of petrified wood (over 25lbs./day, up to 250lbs./year), or collecting fossils for commercial purposes on public lands.
18. For Minerals and ROWs: Prior to commencement of gathering operations, the BLM would notify existing right-of-way holders, range permittees, operators, and lessees of any location, date, and time associated with the gather that may affect their permitted activities.

3.6. Alternative D: No Action Alternative

Under Alternative D, excess wild horses would not be gathered or removed from areas within and adjacent to the WDHA.

3.7. Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

3.7.1. *Alternative Gather and Removal Methods*

1. **Other alternative capture techniques:** The BLM identified net gunning, chemical immobilization, and wrangler/horseback drive trapping as other capture techniques for gathering wild horses.

Generally, net gunning techniques normally used to capture animals also rely on helicopters. The BLM has not approved this technique for the use in gathering of wild horses.

Chemical immobilization is a very specialized technique and strictly regulated. Currently, the BLM does not have sufficient expertise to implement this method and it would be impractical to use given the size and with the varied topographic and rough terrain features of the WDHA, access limitations and the approachability of the wild horses.

Use of wrangler on horseback drive-trapping as the only gather method to remove excess wild horses can be fairly effective on a small scale or for the gathering of individual wild horses but due to the number of excess wild horses to be gathered, the large geographic size of the WDHA, rough terrain, and approachability of the wild horses in this area this

technique would be ineffective and impractical to meet the purpose and need. Horseback drive-trapping is also very labor intensive and can be harmful to the domestic horses and wranglers during the gather operations.

For the reasons listed above, these alternative gather methods were eliminated from further consideration.

2. **Phased removal of wild horses in zones of the WDHA:** This alternative identifies areas where gather and removal operations would focus by a given year involving a phased removal over a multiple year period utilizing the various capture methods as follows:
 - Year 1: Gather and removal operations would be focused on the area east of Texas Mountain, south of Little Horse Draw, west of West Creek, and north of Texas Draw, utilizing helicopter drive trapping as the primary capture method.
 - Year 2: Gather and removal operations would be focused on the area west of Texas Mountain, south of Red Wash, and all wild horses outside of the WDHA to the south and west of the WDHA boundary utilizing helicopter drive trap as the primary capture method.
 - Year 3: Gather and removal operations would be focused in northern portion of WDHA, north of Little Horse Draw and Red Wash utilizing helicopter drive trap as the primary method of capture.
 - Year 4: Gather and removal operations utilizing helicopter drive trap method to gather excess wild horses in the entire WDHA. Water and/or bait trapping capture methods will be implemented and conducted throughout the year as environmental conditions, funding, and time warrant to gather and remove all remaining excess wild horses not captured utilizing helicopter drive trapping.
 - Year 5: Continue with water and/or bait trapping and implementing helicopter drive trap if warranted to gather and remove excess wild horses from within and adjacent to the WDHA.

Gather operations would be recurring until all excess wild horses are gathered and removed from within and outside of the WDHA.

This alternative could only be successful if the BLM is able to conduct the gathers and removals with annual operations, which the BLM is not currently able to do because of allocating an annual budget for gathers, as well as, finding the necessary space to place wild horses in short-term or long-term holding facilities. Further, if BLM is only able to gather Year 1 any wild horses that remain adjacent to that area would simply reestablish in that area in order to gain access to newly available forage, water, space and cover that they require to survive. For these reasons, this alternative was eliminated from further consideration.

3. **Capture all excess wild horses using all available approved gather methods then geld all stallions over the age of 3 and return them to the WDHA:** This alternative is similar to Alternative A except all stallions over 3 years of age would be gelded and then returned to the WDHA. As gather operations are conducted over time, all mares, foals, and stallions 2 years old or younger would be gathered and removed from the WDHA. All stallions aged 3 and older would be gelded that are returned to the WDHA to reduce the number of stallions available to breed any remaining wild horse mares that are located within the WDHA or adjacent areas. Gather operations would be recurring until a non-reproducing herd is established within the WDHA. A conservative estimate of reaching a non-reproducing herd is approximately 10 years with an additional 25 years until all wild horses have lived out their natural lives in or adjacent to the WDHA with the result that no wild horses are located within or adjacent to the WDHA. There is additional risk and/or complications which could result in death from the gelding process of the stallions. The gelding of the stallions also eliminates the hormonally driven behavior of the stallions. This alternative does not meet plan conformance for no wild horses to be located within the WDHA therefore this alternative was eliminated from further consideration.
4. **Make individualized excess wild horse determinations prior to removal:** An alternative whereby the BLM would make on-the-ground and individualized excess wild horse determinations prior to removal of wild horses has been advocated by some members of the public. Under the view set forth in some public comments for wild horse gathers nationwide, a tiered or phased removal of wild horses from the range is mandated by the WFRHBA. Specifically, this alternative would involve a tiered gather approach, whereby the BLM would first identify and remove old, sick, or lame animals in order to euthanize those animals on the range prior to gather. Second, the BLM would identify and remove wild horses for which adoption demand exists, e.g., younger wild horses or wild horses with unusual and interesting markings. Under the WFRHBA(1333(b)(2)(iv)(C)), the BLM would then destroy any additional excess wild horses for which adoption demand does not exist in the most humane and cost effective manner possible, although euthanasia has been limited by Congressional appropriations.

This proposed alternative could be viable in situations where the project area is contained, the area is readily accessible and wild horses are clearly visible, and where the number of wild horses to be removed is so small that a targeted approach to removal can be implemented. However, under the conditions present within the gather area and the substantial number of excess wild horses, this alternative is impractical, if not impossible, as well as less humane for a variety of reasons.

First, the BLM does euthanize old, sick, or lame animals on the range when such animals have been identified. This occurs on an on-going basis and is not limited to wild horse gathers. During a gather, if old, sick, or lame animals are found and it is clear that an animal's condition requires the animal to be put down, that animal is separated from the rest of the group that is being herded so that it can be euthanized on the range. However, wild horses that meet the criteria for humane destruction because they are old, sick, or lame

usually cannot be identified as such until they have been gathered and examined up close (e.g., determine whether the wild horses have lost all their teeth or are club footed). Old, sick, and lame wild horses meeting the criteria for humane euthanasia are also only a small fraction of the total number of wild horses to be gathered, comprising on average about 0.5 percent of gathered wild horses. Due to the size of the gather area, access limitations associated with topographic and terrain features and the challenges of approaching wild horses close enough to make an individualized determination of whether a wild horse is old, sick, or lame, it would be virtually impossible to conduct a phased culling of such wild horses on the range without actually gathering and examining the wild horses.

Similarly, rounding up and removing wild horses for which an adoption demand exists, before gathering any other excess wild horses, would be both impractical and much more disruptive and traumatic for the animals. Recent adoptions have only successfully adopted out approximately less than five percent of all excess wild horses removed from the range on an annual basis. The size of the gather area, varied topographic and rough terrain features, difficulties of approaching the wild horses close enough to determine age and whether they have characteristics (such as color or markings) that make them more adoptable, the impracticalities inherent in attempting to separate the small number of adoptable wild horses from the rest of the herd, and the impacts to the wild horses from the closer contact necessary, makes such phased removal a much less desirable method for gathering excess wild horses. This approach would create a substantially higher level of disruption for the wild horses on the range and would also make it much more difficult to gather the remaining excess wild horses. Furthermore, if the BLM plans to apply any population controls to gathered wild horses prior to release, it would be necessary to gather more than just the excess wild horses to be removed, making this type of phased approach completely unnecessary and counter-productive.

Making a determination of excess as to a specific wild horse under this alternative, and then successfully gathering that individual wild horse would be impractical to implement (if not impossible) due to the size of the gather area, terrain challenges and difficulties approaching the wild horses close enough to make an individualized determination. This tiered approach would also be extremely disruptive to the wild horses due to repeated culling and gather activities over a short period of time. Gathering excess wild horses under this alternative would greatly increase the potential stress placed on the animals due to repeated attempts to capture specific animals and not others in the band. This in turn would increase the potential for injury, separation of mare/foal pairs, and possible mortality. This alternative would be impractical to implement (if not impossible), would be cost-prohibitive, and would be unlikely to result in the successful removal of excess wild horses or application of population controls to released wild horses. This approach would also be less humane and more disruptive and traumatic for the wild horses. This alternative was therefore eliminated from any further consideration.

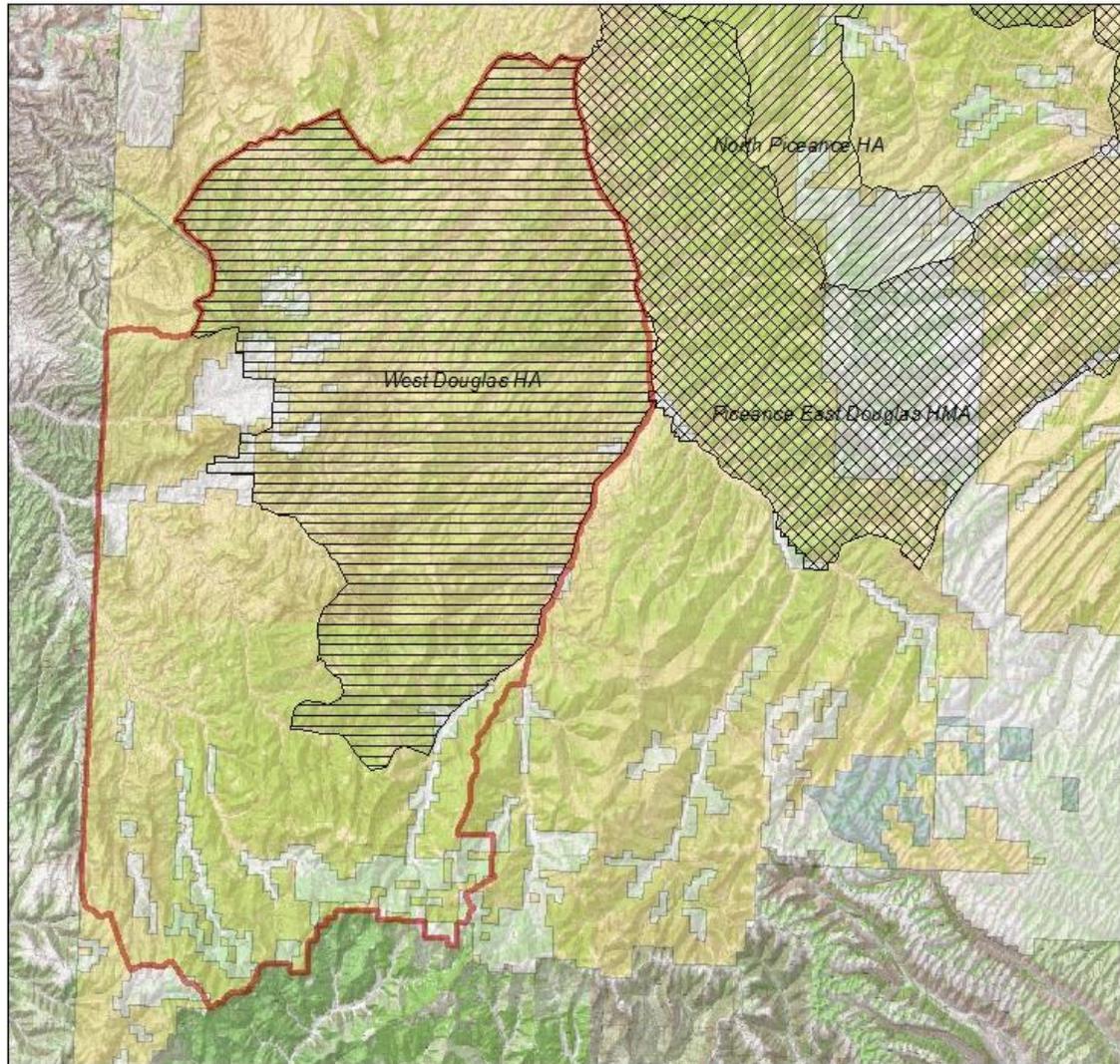
3.7.2. *Alternatives Considered Outside the Scope of this EA*

1. **Remove or reduce livestock within the WDHA and adjacent lands:** This action would

not be in conformance with the existing land use plan and is contrary to the BLM's multiple-use mission as outlined in the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), and would be inconsistent with the WFRHBA, which directs the Secretary to immediately remove excess wild horses once it is determined excess wild horses exist. Additionally this would only be effective for the very short term because the wild horse population would continue to increase at a recruitment rate of approximately 20 percent annually. Eventually the WDHA and adjacent lands would no longer be capable of supporting the excess wild horse population due to limited resources and limited space.

2. **Gather all excess wild horses within and outside the WDHA, construct temporary holding facilities on BLM land within the WDHA, and hold the wild horses until range conditions improve:** This alternative would involve gathering and holding excess wild horses from within and outside the WDHA. Excess horses would be gathered using all approved capture methods. Gathered animals would be held at a temporary holding facility constructed within the HA. Animals would be held until rangeland health conditions improve and the BLM may also conduct range improvement projects such as prescribed burning or mechanical treatment and seeding to improve habitat. Once rangeland health has improved to a condition that is sustainable and would support a herd of wild horses along with the other multiple uses in the area, a small herd of wild horses compatible with maintaining rangeland health would be released into the HA. All excess horses that are not released into the HA would be moved to short term holding facilities. Under this alternative, it is assumed that under total deferment, some areas will take three or more years under favorable conditions to recover to healthy rangelands. This alternative was dismissed from detailed analysis for failing to meet the purpose and need.

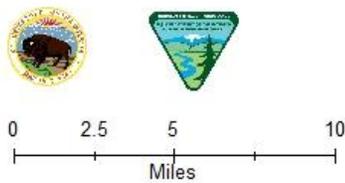
Appendix A. Figure 1



Legend

- WDHA Gather Area
- North Piceance HA
- Piceance East Douglas HMA
- West Douglas HA
- BLM
- CDW
- PRI
- STA

January 9, 2015



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