



In Reply Refer To:

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Billings Field Office
5001 Southgate Drive
Billings, Montana 59101
<http://www.blm.gov/mt>



4710 (010.JB)

February 10, 2011

Memorandum

To: James M. Sparks, Field Manager
From: Jared Bybee, Wild Horse and Burro Specialist
Subject: Field Inspection of the PMWHR Escalating Problem

BLM Manual 4720 and I.M. 2009-85 states in part: Escalating problems are defined as conditions that deteriorate over time. The key indicators of escalating problems are a decline in the amount of forage or water available for wild horse or burro use, which results in negative impacts to animal condition and rangeland health. Causal factors are normally drought or animals in excess of AML.

However the current escalating problem is due to a “heavier” than average winter season, limited forage resources in crucial winter range, and wild horses limited to smaller areas than over past years.

The PMWHR is located in Carbon County, Montana and Big Horn County, Wyoming and consists of lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Forest Service and National Park Service. Since the end second half of November 2010 until present, winter conditions have persisted within the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range. Unlike typical winter patterns that tend to have periods of snow melting this winter has had very few. Conditions on the wild horse range have remained snow covered even in the lowest elevations.

Periodic monitoring and reports from the public have observed dry crusted snow with an under layer of ice from slight thawing and freezing followed by subsequent snowfalls. Wild horses have been digging through snow to get to forage. Two storm systems had passed through the region since the helicopter inventory on February 1, 2010.

A visit to the southern portion of the range occurred briefly on February 5, 2010 during the Society for Range Management’s technical tour. The area was experiencing a heavy snowfall, but temperatures were in the mid twenties Fahrenheit. The same four wild horses were observed that have typically been at the National Park Service Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area entrance to the wild horse range. The wild horses appeared to be maintaining their body condition.

On February 9, 2011 me and Dusty Crow, Rangeland Management Specialist conducted an inspection of the wild horse range. The weather was calm and cold, with temperatures above freezing but no warmer than the lower teens. Approximately 6 inches of new snow was on top of 4-6 inches of hard crusted snow with a layer of rough ice between the snow and the ground. Snow drifts were as deep as 3 feet with snow blown nearly clean of steep ridgelines. We parked at the Burnt Timber entrance after difficulty in reaching the entrance due to deep snow. We proceeded south on foot for approximately one mile along the north administrative pasture fence. We were checking to see if wild horses were “stacking up” on the fence and if the padlocks on the administrative pasture gates could be unlocked or if they would have to be cut if the administrative pasture needed to be opened.

After proceeding south along the fence we found the padlocks rusted but could be unlocked with difficulty. We encountered one band of wild horses tucked up inside a small depression amongst a chugwater formation in a small area with less snow cover than the surrounding area. The wild horses consisted of one stallion two pregnant mares and two foals born last year. The dark foal had a “leppy” look to it (extra shaggy, small but mature looking, and a large hay belly with visible ribs through the winter coat). The mares appeared thin with visible ribs and prominent hip bones. The other foal appeared very healthy as did the stallion. The animals were not lethargic, but rather sore-footed. The horses walked tenderly as the under layer of ice (which is very rough) must be hard on their feet when digging for forage or even walking. The wild horses were foraging on greasewood, desert mule ear, yucca, and digging for three-awn. We could not locate any other wild horses so we returned to the vehicle. After arriving at the vehicle and taking a rest we drove to the Sykes entrance. Upon arrival at Sykes everything was drifted in and travel was impossible with a wheeled vehicle. After a very strenuous hike in deep snow at times at Burnt Timber we decided it was best to return to Billings.

Although the snow cover is heavy and ice layers make travel and grazing difficult, the situation is not an emergency as pregnant mares do tend to get drawn down, though typically not this early. The entire situation cannot be 100 percent determined from observation of one band. Due to the amount of snow cover, the availability of forage in the administrative pasture is no better than on the wild horse range. I suspect most of the wild horses are tucked into small difficult to see areas similar to the wild horse band observed and consistent with observations during the flight on February 1, 2011. A warming weather pattern is forecast for the next 7-10 days, and another inspection will be conducted next week. There is still an escalating problem, but no emergency.

Jared Bybee

Rangeland Management Specialist (State Wild Horse and Burro Specialist)
Billings Field Office

Attachments:

1. Photos

Band of wild horses in observed Henneke condition class 3 and 5

