

Bureau of Land  
Management

Battle Mountain District  
Mount Lewis Field Office

**FIELD REPORT  
DIAMOND HERD  
MANAGEMENT AREA  
08/09/12**

## **Overview**

The Diamond HMA is approximately 166,055 acres located north of Eureka Nevada. It encompasses the western side of the diamond Mountain Range and is managed as a Complex with the Diamond Hills North HMA to the north and the Diamond Hills South HMA to the east. Elevations reach 10,000 feet at the highest point and wild horses are known to trail along the ridge and move back and forth onto the Ely side. During winter when adequate snow is received, it is thought that a number of wild horses move north to the Elko portion of the Complex. The current estimated population of the entire Complex is 852, with 400-450 or more currently residing on the Diamond HMA. The AML for the Complex is 201, with the Diamond HMA AML set at 151. The last inventory completed in March 2012, recorded many horses on the Elko portion. For that reason, the running population estimate from that flight is approximately 342 which hasn't been adjusted for a summer distribution. The last gather was completed summer 2004. Livestock have been removed from one allotment which was affected by a large concentration of wild horses. BMD staff have met with the permittees in the two other primary allotments in the HMA and are requesting voluntary removal of livestock. If the request is not granted, Decisions are likely. Drought triggers such as utilization, drought induced senescence and lack of production have been exceeded throughout the HMA.

In anticipation of drought conditions in 2012, monitoring of the Diamond HMA forage and water has been ongoing.

## **Monitoring**

Monitoring by Great Basin Institute (GBI) interns began May 23. Many of the key waters were inventoried, followed by drought monitoring at key management areas and continued recheck of water availability and wild horse condition. GBIs completed the Drought Monitoring Summary and took note of drought indicators including vigor, forage abundance, and utilization. This information was summarized into a detailed report. Wild horse body condition and forage and water concerns were also documented.

## **Water Availability**

Water sources throughout the Diamond HMA consist of small mountain springs located far into inaccessible canyons, spring developments, and troughs. A few of the drainages support intermittent flow, and are providing small pools of water. Water is very limited in 2012, and many springs have dried up. The situation varies across the HMA and is not uniform. The situation is the worst at Three Springs Canyon where small pools that support less than a quart of water are being used by 25-30 wild horses. In the Three Mile Allotment, water in two canyons is very limited and being utilized by as many as 60-80 wild horses. These horses are mobile and able to travel from canyon to canyon and up and down the mountain range along the ridge line as well as onto the Ely side of the Mountain. It is not known if they will move if these sources go dry. Three Springs Canyon requires a six hour hike round trip to re-check, as is common in many canyons on the mountain range.

In the southern portion of the HMA in the Black Point Allotment, the population is thought to be low, and has been since the last gather in 2004. Waters are also thought to be somewhat more plentiful. Because there are fewer horses and more forage available, it has not been a top monitoring priority. In the far north portion of the HMA, waters are limited as well, consisting of a few small springs and troughs. Due to the limited access, return visits to several of the harder to reach areas has not yet been conducted.

Approximately 50-60 wild horses are relying on water on private land owned by the permittee. He has stated that he may close his gate at anytime and restrict access.

Monitoring continues. An overflight is planned for August 22 to assess conditions of the inaccessible areas and wild horse distribution and body condition.

### **Water Hauling and other Action**

No water hauling efforts have been employed at this time. Monitoring does not indicate water stressed wild horses at this time. No game camera monitoring sites have been established.

### **Forage Conditions**

The simplest way to explain the forage conditions in 2012 is that nothing grew and the wild horse population is 2-3 times AML. The entire HMA is severely drought affected. Low and mid elevations in the upper 2/3 of the HMA show practically no growth of perennial grasses, and those that are present are dormant, and have not reproduced. Past grazing utilization (winter 2011) was heavy to severe in many locations and moderate at this time. Many areas are dominated by cheatgrass which also did not appear to grow this year. Residual forage is very limited and may not be adequate to support the current population of wild horses if much snow is received on the Mountain. Higher elevations do support residual production of perennial bunchgrasses on the hillsides which will be available to the wild horses as weather permits.

The permittees on the primary allotments within the HMA have substantially reduced livestock and have been implementing water hauling and other efforts to manage their herds. Despite their efforts, serious resource impacts have occurred due to livestock use in areas heavily utilized by wild horses and now severely drought affected. In some areas, perennial grass identification is not possible due to the lack of production and the degree of utilization and trampling by wild horses and livestock. Though the wild horses have not had the degree of riparian impacts that livestock have, they have been responsible for causing substantial damage to range improvements. One horse was caught in the act by the permittee as it ran away with the float to the water development in it's mouth!

The body condition does not reflect forage concerns at this time. However it is not difficult to see while passing through the HMA that serious forage limitations face the wild horses this winter especially if snow covers the mountains and pushes the population down to the limited lower elevations in the HMA.

Though monitoring showed improvement of rangeland health in these cheatgrass dominated sites since the last gather in 2004, recent monitoring indicates a reversed trend and potential loss of the progress made in the past 15 years, due in part to a continued overpopulation of wild horses.

### **Animal Conditions and concerns**

Wild horses observed in the HMA are in good body condition with observed BCS of 4.5-5.5. No thin wild horses have been observed and all but one foal have been good sized and healthy. Most wild horses observed are moving up onto the ridges and traveling down to the drainages for water. Bands may linger in the foothills in the afternoon or morning hours.

### **Management Plans**

At this time, the monitoring of forage and water availability and wild horse body condition has been ongoing. The Diamond Complex is currently on the winter 2013 gather schedule. It is expected that approximately ½ of the wild horses would need to be removed to achieve AML in this HMA, considering some of them will have moved north onto the Elko portion.

The BMD would like to avoid an emergency gather operation in order to retain optimum management tools such as fertility control and to conduct the gather during the winter which would improve efficiency and animal health. Should continue monitoring indicate water stressed or starving wild horses, emergency removal of some animals from affected areas would be necessary. It is unknown whether water or bait trapping could be accomplished. Water hauling could also be implemented.

The BMD also recommends during the planned gather to remove only animals 4 years old and younger where possible in order to remove wild horses that would certainly need to be held in long term holding.

## Diamond Springs Overview Photos



Key Area DS-9, south of the Diamond Springs Ranch. Low productivity of remaining key grasses. 63.6% utilization of Needleandthread grass recorded at this location. Note small size and use of grasses.





Key Area DS-5, Judd Canyon. Older livestock use (spring 2012) was apparent, with some older wild horse sign.



24.25% utilization was recorded at this site on Needleandthread grass. No reproduction of the key species was noted.



Key Area DS-11, at the northern end of the Diamond Range. The area is characterized by lack of perennial forage. Old sign of wild horses and livestock was present, but no sign of current use.





Three Mile Allotment Valley. Lack of perennial or any other vegetation in the understory



Three Mile Allotment Valleyheavily utilized Indian Ricegrass.



Fenceline contrast, Walters Canyon Burn Exclosure.



Walters Canyon Upland Range Condition. The only grass present is cheatgrass.



Wild horses trail up the hillside. Photo shows lack of perennial forage across the landscape.



Heavily utilized perennial grass. No 2012 growth apparent.



Three Mile Canyon Spring provides reliable water at this location.



Wild horses in mid-Three Mile Canyon drinking from a degraded spring (photo below).



Severely degraded spring source, old utilization cage, dwindling water being used by wild horses.

Three Springs Canyon. Three Springs. Area is completely beat out by wild horses, and little water remains for the 30 wild horses utilizing these sources.



One of the three Springs



Third of the Three Springs



Wild horses in Three Springs Canyon waiting for the monitoring staff to leave so that they could return to water. They are not in ideal body condition, but appear to be averaging Body Condition Score 4 (moderately thin) at this time.



Heavy trailing by wild horses and drought affected rangeland in the Corta Allotment at the north end of the HMA.



Corta water source. Flow is about 1 pint per minute. Trailing is heavy to this source.



Corta Allotment Spring at the north end of the HMA.



Fourmile Canyon, high elevation trough at spring, with secondary trough below the spring area shown below. Both are currently supplying water.

