

Gather Process

Where would the BLM gather horses?

The BLM would remove up to 70 excess wild horses in central Nevada within the Reveille HMA as well any wild horses residing outside the established boundaries of the HMA. The Reveille HMA is located approximately 50 miles east of Tonopah, Nevada in Nye County.

Will BLM remove all the horses that are gathered?

No. The BLM is gathering more horses than it is removing in order to apply fertility control and release the appropriate proportions of males to females to achieve a sex ratio that is 60 percent males to 40 percent females. Therefore, the goal is to gather up to 120 horses, but only remove about 70 excess horses. The actual number of wild horses removed will depend on the overall success of the gather operations, but the overall post-gather target population is about 100 horses that would remain within the HMA.

How does the BLM gather horses?

The BLM uses a Federal gather contractor to gather wild horses from HMAs where the BLM has determined that excess animals exist. The contractor uses a helicopter to locate and herd horses towards a set of corrals where the horses are gathered. The helicopter is assisted by a ground crew and the use of a domesticated horse to lead the gathered horses into the corrals. If needed, the ground crew may assist the helicopter by roping the horses from horseback.

Why are you using a helicopter to gather wild horses? I've been told that it is inhumane.

The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, as amended, authorizes the BLM and the Forest Service to use helicopters to gather animals, as well as to use motorized vehicles to transport gathered animals. The BLM has utilized helicopters to capture wild horses and burros since the late 1970's.

The capture of wild horses utilizing helicopter is the safest and most efficient method to remove large numbers of wild horses from public lands. The use of helicopters and motorized vehicles has proven to be a safe, effective, and practical means for the gather and removal of excess wild horses and burros from the range. This is demonstrated by the gather of nearly 25,000 wild horses and burros during fiscal years 2004-2008 with a mortality rate of less than one half of one percent (<0.5%). In fact, most injuries or death occur *after* the animal is gathered and in the process of being sorted or loaded for transport, or while in the holding corrals. Additionally, animals may be identified for euthanasia for reasons other than injuries sustained by helicopter gathering and usually include genetic deformities, old injuries, chronic illness, or severe tooth loss from old age (0.4% on a recent Battle Mountain District gather of 1,705 wild horses).

We work close with our contractors and we are onsite to monitor the gather to assure that the horses are gathered in manner that will minimize any injuries or harm. For example, the contractor's helicopter pilot moves the animals in a manner that allows young horses – foals - to remain with their mothers. The BLM also prohibits gathering wild horses with a helicopter during the 6 weeks before and the 6 weeks following the peak foaling period such as March through June for most wild horse herds. Horses are allowed to travel at their own pace for the most part, and if needed due to young, old, or sick animals, the pilots let the horses walk.

Though the horses experience a heightened stress level for the short period of time that the helicopter is herding the animals towards the gather corrals, animals calm down quite quickly afterwards. Helicopter gathers require a third to half the time of traditional water or horseback trapping methods. Refer to Appendix A of the Gather Plan for more information about helicopter gather methods, and Section 3.2 of the EA for anticipated impacts to wild horses.

Other methods of gathering horses on horseback or water trapping can be effective in small gathers and in confined spaces, but they are very time consuming and are not nearly as efficient as helicopter gathers. Water trapping can be very effective when water resources are scarce but nearly impossible otherwise.

Using horseback riders to herd the horses into gather corrals is very difficult in large open areas of public lands. This practice is very hard on the domestic horses and the riders; both have a high likelihood of being hurt. This method is very inefficient and takes an enormous amount of time to complete.

For the Reveille HMA, gathering on horseback or through use of water trapping would not be effective means because:

- the Reveille Allotment gather area encompass more than 600,000 acres which is too large to feasibly use these methods;
- the presence of water sources on both private and public lands inside and outside the HMA boundary would make it almost impossible to restrict wild horse access to the extent needed to effectively gather and remove the excess animal and
- water rights within the HMA are primarily held by the grazing permittee.

I've read that the horses are traumatized – is this true?

Professional observations over the past 35 years indicate the impacts associated with a gather have proven to be temporary in nature. Horses adjust to the new environment and calmly proceed to eat hay, drink water and adapt to human presence. Because wild horses are “wild”, they are frightened during the gather activities; however every precaution is taken to make sure the activities are kept as calm as possible.



Young foal investigates one of the gather workers. Silver Peak HMA gather, September 2006.

How can the BLM justify tearing apart wild horse family units?

With the exception of changes to herd demographics, professional observations over the past 35 years indicate the direct population wide impacts associated with a gather have proven to be temporary in nature. Most, if not all, impacts disappear within hours to several days of release. No observable effects associated with these impacts would be expected within one month of release, except for a heightened awareness of human presence.

Does the public have input regarding the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles in managing wild horses and burros?

Yes, Section 9 of the 1971 Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, requires that a public hearing be held prior to the use of helicopters and motorized vehicles. Hearings are held annually. The purpose of the hearings is to hear public concerns so that BLM can review its standard operating procedures to assure animals are treated humanely.

What are SOPs?

SOPs are Standard Operating Procedures. The BLM follows standardized methods of operation which have been developed over time to assure the safe, effective, and humane handling and treatment of wild horses.



Veterinarian Student, Patty Maxwell and Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Veterinarian draw blood from a wild horse in the working chute for genetics analysis. Summer, 2005, Fish Creek Complex. BLM now collects hair samples from the mane instead of collecting blood.

What standard procedures does the BLM use to assure humane handling and treatment of wild horses during gathers?

The Standard Operating Procedures are outlined in the gather contract, and included within the Environmental Assessments for wild horse gathers. They outline the specific actions the contractor is expected to take to assure the safe, effective and humane handling and treatment of wild horses during gather operations. The procedures address the feeding, care, sorting, handling, transportation, equipment, communications, animal condition, fertility control, etc.

How does the mortality experienced during gathers compare to natural mortality?

The natural mortality on the range varies from about 5-8% per year for foals (animals under age 1), about 5% per year for horses ages 1-15, and 5-100% for animals age 16 and older (Stephen Jenkins, 1996, Garrott and Taylor, 1990).

In situations where forage and/or water are limited, mortality rates increase, with the greatest impact to young foals, nursing mares and older horses.

In comparison, mortality from injuries sustained during gathers is about 0.5%, with another 0.5% euthanized due to pre-existing conditions such as blindness or excessive tooth wear.

Why do horses die during gathers?

During wild horse gathers, animals may die due to injuries sustained during the gather which amount to only one half of 1%, which is very low when handling wild animals. In other cases, animals are humanely euthanized due to issues that existed before the gather.

Animals that are euthanized for non-gather related reasons include those with old injuries (broken hip, leg) that have caused the animal to suffer from pain or prevents them from being able to travel or maintain adequate body condition; old animals that have lived a successful life on the range, but now have few teeth remaining, are in poor body condition, or are weak from old age; and wild horses that have congenital (genetic) or serious physical defects such as club foot, or sway back and would not be successfully adopted, or should not be returned to the range.

In a recent gather completed by the Battle Mountain District in January 2009, a total of 1,705 wild horses were gathered. Eleven of these animals (0.65%) were humanely euthanized in accordance with BLM policy due to pre-existing conditions such as blindness, excessive tooth wear or congenital defects. Eight additional animals (0.47%) were euthanized (5) or accidentally killed (3) from injuries attributable to the gather. These injuries occurred within the holding corrals several days after the animal was captured, or occurred during the actual capture activities. All total, 19 wild horses were euthanized or died, which equates to 1.1% of the total number captured.

I hear that you slaughter wild horses.

We do not slaughter wild horses. On the contrary, we complete extensive analysis and monitoring to develop Appropriate Management Levels to ensure healthy wild horses and healthy rangelands, removing wild horses when the population grows beyond the AML in order to prevent range degradation. During the gathers, wild horses are cared for humanely. In many cases, these horses are saved from pain and suffering due to starvation or lack of water. When they come into short term holding, a veterinarian gives each horse a complete check up. They are de-wormed and vaccinated. At times we have to euthanize for humane reasons, and that percentage is extremely low.

I hear that you don't have a veterinarian during the gathers.

A veterinarian is either on call or present during the gathers. Once gathered and transported to BLM facilities, a veterinarian is available to check all of the horses as they are prepared for adoption. Injuries and illness are best treated at the holding facilities. Injuries that required treatment occur infrequently during gathers.

I object to the horses losing their freedom.

The range is an unstable ecosystem. It is a high desert environment where forage and water supplies are naturally limited. Add to this, harsh winters where the snow and ice cover the ground with a thick layer, drought, or fires ignited by lightning, and the already limited food supply becomes even scarcer.

Wild horses removed from the range go on to either be adopted by loving families or will go to Long Term Holding Pastures, where they will roam free without limited forage or water for the rest of their lives.

Why doesn't the BLM manage Herd Management Areas principally for wild horses and burros?

Congress intended to manage wild horses and burros as one of the many uses of the public lands, not a single use. Therefore, the BLM is required to manage wild horses and burros in a manner designed to achieve a thriving natural ecological balance between wild horse and burro populations, wildlife, domestic livestock, vegetation and other uses. However, the BLM may designate specific herd management areas to be managed principally, but not necessarily exclusively, for wild horse or burro herds.