

# Frequently Asked Questions About the Diamond Complex Wild Horse Gather

## About the Diamond Complex Gather

### ***Why is the BLM gathering the Diamond Complex?***

The action is needed to prevent further habitat degradation and promote healthy rangeland for all users of the diverse ecosystems within the Diamond Complex and to resolve the public safety issues with wild horses congregating on the highway outside of the Diamond Hills South HMA in White Pine County.

The proposed gather is needed to achieve and maintain the Appropriate Management Level (AML) of wild horses in Diamond Complex and prevent further deterioration resulting from the current overpopulation within the Complex. Maintaining proper numbers of wild horses and thriving natural ecological balance is key to maintaining and improving important habitat that is vital to not only wildlife, but to wild horses as well. The current population of wild horses within the Complex is approximately 387% of the established AML. Wild horses are concentrating within the Complex, causing impacts to important wildlife habitat, riparian resources and key perennial grasses. Outside of HMA boundaries, 311 horses currently reside, representing nearly 38% of the total horses within the Complex. This location is not designated for use by wild horses and is not a Herd Area where wild horses were documented when the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act passed in 1971. The horses outside the HMA also cause public safety issues by congregating on the highway in the area, and several have been hit by vehicles. Further compounding the issue is the severe to extreme drought conditions experienced in 2012. Growth season precipitation received in the area was 56-63% of the average. Perennial grasses and forbs did not grow in the lower elevations and vegetation experienced drought stress. Drought monitoring through 2012, documented increased trailing, heavy to severe utilization, drying water sources and lack of forage in the low elevations. All of which would be critical to support wild horses in the Diamond Complex through the winter.

### ***Where would the BLM gather wild horses?***

The BLM would gather wild horses within the Diamond Complex, which is comprised of the Diamond, Diamond Hills North and Diamond Hills South Herd Management Areas (HMAs) and areas outside of the HMA boundaries that are not designated for wild horse use.

### ***What is the Diamond Complex and why is it a Complex?***

The Diamond Complex consists of the Diamond, Diamond Hills North and Diamond Hills South HMAs. These HMAs are located along the Diamond Mountain Range and Diamond Hills north of Eureka, Nevada. The three HMAs also fall into three counties (Eureka, Elko and White Pine respectively) and three BLM Districts (Battle Mountain, Elko and Ely respectively). The HMAs border one another and wild horses move east-west and north-south throughout the changing seasons. As a result, the area is managed as a Complex. The Battle Mountain District, Mount Lewis Field Office is lead for preparation of the gather EA and associated documents. Each BLM District will conduct the gather of their own HMA, all the while coordinating with each other to ensure continuity and achievement of the targets for the Complex as a whole.

### ***What does the BLM plan to do, what are the objectives of the gather?***

The BLM plans to gather the Diamond Complex to remove excess wild horses and achieve the high range of AML. The current population according to the most recent inventory in November 2012 is 813 wild horses, whereas the upper range of AML is 210 wild horses. The BLM would continue gathering wild horses so that fertility control could be given to the mares. The post gather goal is 210 wild horses. It is estimated that approximately 45 wild horses would evade capture, so approximately 165 wild horses would be released back to the range. For this phase of the gather, the BLM would adjust sex ratios to favor studs at a ratio of 60:40.

### ***What population control strategies are proposed to reduce the numbers of wild horses that have to be gathered or removed in the future?***

The Diamond Complex includes the proposal to treat mares with an injection of the fertility control drug PZP-22 in order to reduce the population growth rates. The AML would be achieved through multiple gathers. Until the low AML is achieved, an adjustment of sex ratios to favor males would also be proposed, which would result in the post gather population being comprised of approximately 60% studs. Normal sex ratios approximate 50% mares and 50% studs.

### ***What is the Appropriate Management Level of wild horses (or burros)?***

The appropriate management level or AML, is the number of wild horses or burros to be managed within a designated HMA which results in a thriving natural ecological balance and avoids a deterioration of the range. The upper range of AML for the Diamond Complex is 210 and the 2012 estimated population is 813 wild horses according to the direct count results obtained during a comprehensive helicopter inventory completed November 6-7, 2012.

***The Diamond Gather EA and Decision say that it is a phased gather. What does this mean and why is it being implemented this way?***

Due to national funding and holding space limitations, as well as gather efficiency limitations, BLM cannot achieve low-range AML or implement a sufficient level of population controls with a single gather in 2013. Under the Proposed Action as described in the EA, the 2013 gather would be the first phase in a 10-year management strategy that would help reduce the need for large scale wild horse gathers while still achieving BLM's management goals of attaining AML, reducing population growth rates, and obtaining a thriving natural ecological balance on the range. The BLM would gather and remove approximately 603 excess animals in the initial 2013 gather, resulting in an initial post gather population at approximately the high end of AML (210 wild horses).

Wild horses would continue to be gathered in periodic follow-up gathers over the 10-year period in order to apply fertility control to all mares released back to the range. Since the first phase of the gather would not achieve the desired low AML, a follow-up gather would be planned in two to three years. The overall objective of the Proposed Action as described in the EA, over the 10 -year period for the gather operations would be to gather and remove a sufficient number of excess wild horses within the project area to achieve a population of 123 wild horses, which is the combined low AML for the Diamond Complex and to be able to maintain population at AML for 3-4 years (or longer) through application of fertility controls.

This phased approach allows for a lower number of excess wild horses to be removed in the initial 2013 gather, begins fertility treatments immediately, allows for a smaller number of excess wild horses to be removed in a follow-up gather(s) - ideally at a level consistent with adoption demand thereby eliminating the need to finding long-term holding space, and allows for additional fertility treatments for horses that will not be removed from the Complex so as to achieve population control objectives.

***Will EAs be completed prior to future gathers that include opportunities for public input and comment?***

Prior to subsequent follow-up gathers the BLM would review resource and inventory monitoring data and identify the need for continued implementation of population controls and removal of excess wild horses. Following this review, the BLM would issue a notification to the public informing them of our legal justification for the continuation of the management action initiated in 2013 and the need for the follow-up gather. Through review of resource and monitoring data and any changes that may have occurred since the 2013 gather, the BLM would determine if the 2012 Diamond Complex EA is adequate or if additional environmental documentation is needed. If a new EA is not warranted (i.e., the action is adequately analyzed in an existing NEPA document and is in conformance with the Land Use Plan), then one would not be completed. For more information, refer to the BLMs National Environmental Policy Act Handbook, H-1790-1.

***Will the public be notified about future gathers? Will public viewing opportunities be available?***

The public would be notified of future gathers and would notify the public about opportunities for viewing during the gather.

***Why is the BLM proposing to remove horses below the AML?***

Many AMLs are set as ranges, which allow HMAs to be gathered down to the low AML, and then allow the population to increase to the high AML before another gather is needed. In the case of the Diamond Complex, two of the three AMLs were established as single numbers, which represents the number of wild horses to which would provide for a thriving natural ecological balance and prevent deterioration of the range. Exceeding the AML would allow continued damage to the range, therefore the BLM would plan to gather below the AML and allow the population to increase to AML between gathers. In the case of the Proposed Action, the BLM would achieve the low AML through multiple gathers conducted at 2-3 year intervals.

***How can an AML this low and maintain a genetically healthy herd.***

As described in the EA, blood samples for genetic analysis were collected during the most recent gather completed in 2004. Results indicate high genetic variability consistent with a herd of mixed origins. Additionally, there is potential movement between the Diamond Complex, the Triple B HMA and the Cherry Springs WHT. Genetic samples will be collected during the proposed 2013 gather, including a much larger sample size than assessed in 2004, which would be compared to the baseline information collected in 2004. Should concerns be raised with the genetic health of the wild horses in the Complex, management actions could be developed to address them such as augmenting the herd with horses from similar HMAs, and age or sex selection to enhance genetic health.

***Is this an emergency action?***

No, this is not an emergency action at this time. Despite severe and extreme drought conditions throughout Nevada, and threats to wild horse health in the Diamond Complex due to limited water and forage, the wild horses were able to access water and forage sources at higher elevations. Due to the lack of forage in the winter habitat, the situation could escalate into an emergency this winter as snow in the higher elevations precludes use of forage in these areas. Monitoring is ongoing to document forage and water availability and wild horse body condition. During the inventory completed in November 2012, it was noted that body condition of the wild horses in the Diamond HMA had deteriorated since the August 2012 over-flight. Numerous mares were observed showing accentuated hips, ribs and backbones. With winter snows, wild horse health throughout the Complex is expected to steadily worsen. By the time the gather takes place, there could be many weak or thin animals suffering due to lack of nutritious forage.