



United States Department of the Interior



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In Reply Refer To:

4700 (NV06200)

Dear Interested Public,

The Mount Lewis Field Office (MLFO) within the Battle Mountain District is planning to complete an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the impacts of conducting a wild horse gather within the Diamond Complex, which consists of the Diamond, Diamond Hills North and Diamond Hills South Herd Management Areas (HMAs). In conjunction with the gather, an on-site wild horse adoption event is also planned. The gather area is located within Eureka, Elko and White Pine Counties, north of the town of Eureka, in central Nevada. Refer to the Diamond Complex Background Information below for more information.

These three HMAs are administered as a Complex because they are contiguous and wild horses move among the HMAs. Movement occurs both north and south along the Diamond Mountain Range as well as east and west from one side to the other. The MLFO administers the Diamond HMA, which is the largest of the three HMAs. The Elko District (Tuscarora Field Office) administers the Diamond Hills North HMA, and the Ely District (Egan Field Office) administers the Diamond Hills South HMA. The MLFO will be the lead office for this project and will serve as the lead preparer for the EA.

The Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs) for these HMAs were established through prior decision documents issued from each of the administrative offices, following the collection and analysis of monitoring data and coordination with the interested public. Currently, the population of this Diamond Complex is far in excess of the established AML. The following table displays the HMAs, established AMLs, estimated 2012 populations, and the percent of the estimated 2012 population relative to AMLs.

Table 1: Diamond Complex AML and Population Estimate

HMA	AML	2012 Estimated Population ¹	Percent of AML
Diamond	151	342	226%
Diamond Hills North	37	202	546%
Diamond Hills South	10-22	282 ²	1,282%
Total	210	826	393%

¹ The estimated population following 2012 foaling based on results from a March 2010 population inventory and an average annual increase of 17.5%

² Includes an approximate 232 wild horses outside of designated HMA boundaries.

The most recent gather of the Diamond Complex was completed in July 2004. During the gather, 643 of the estimated 782 wild horses were gathered. The fertility control vaccine PZP-22 was administered to 86 mares before they were re-released to the HMAs within the Complex. A total of 30 studs were re-released. Approximately 139 wild horses were not captured, resulting in a post gather population of approximately 255 wild horses.

Monitoring throughout the Complex has been ongoing, including population inventory helicopter flights in 2006, 2008, and 2010. Other monitoring has included forage utilization measurements, assessments of Proper Functioning Condition of riparian areas, trend, and collection of other rangeland health data.

Through review of this information, it has been determined that an excess population of wild horses exists within the Diamond Complex. Therefore, a gather is proposed to remove approximately 232 wild horses outside of HMA boundaries and approximately 468 wild horses within the Complex to achieve a post gather population of 126 wild horses. Although an AML "range" has not been established for two of the three HMAs (Diamond & Diamond Hills North), gathering below the established AML would prevent the AML from being exceeded for several years and allow improvement of the rangeland vegetation communities and riparian resources that are currently being impacted by the overpopulation of wild horses.

This proposed gather could also include the application of the fertility control vaccine PZP-22 to mares and adjustment of sex ratios to favor males at a 60:40 ratio in order to reduce population growth rates and extend the length of time before another gather would be necessary. Use of fertility control vaccine and/or adjustment of sex ratios could also help to reduce the scale of gathers and the number of animals removed from the range. Future gathers could be conducted to re-treat the population with fertility control and allow limited removals of younger, adoptable animals.

The Diamond Complex is a diverse area consisting of 10,000 foot peaks, steep drainages, rolling foothills, aspen stands, streams, springs and meadows. The Complex provides important habitat to a large diversity of wildlife including Greater sage-grouse, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, raptors, migratory birds, coyote, mountain lion, and reptiles. Currently, the overabundant population of wild horses is adversely affecting valuable habitat needed to support both wildlife and wild horses. In particular, wild horses are concentrated in portions of the Complex, and contributing to degradation of riparian resources, over-utilization of perennial vegetation and soil erosion through trampling and trailing. There are also approximately 232 wild horses outside of HMA boundaries of the Diamond Hills South HMA, impacting areas that are not designated for their use. The grazing allotments within the Complex are permitted for use by livestock. Across the Complex, livestock operators are operating below their permitted levels and/or removing livestock from within the HMAs due to the excessive and concentrated use by wild horses.

A gather of the Diamond Complex is needed to remove excess wild horses and to restore a thriving natural ecological balance to the range as required by the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act (PL 92-195) of 1971.

Though the Diamond Complex has needed a gather to remove excess wild horses for several years, the National Wild Horse and Burro Program budget and other gather priorities have precluded a gather. Gather operations could commence after the completion of the EA/Gather Plan, Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), and the issuance of a management decision. A gather of the Diamond Complex is currently scheduled for January 2013.

As interested public, you are asked to submit comments, issues, alternatives, recommendations, or other input for inclusion into the EA. Please make your submissions in writing or via email to [Diamond Complex Gather@blm.gov](mailto:Diamond_Complex_Gather@blm.gov) to be received in this office no later than June 30, 2012. Keep in mind that comments should be substantive and should be specific to completion of a EA analyzing the impacts of the proposed Diamond Complex wild horse gather. Once complete, the interested public will be notified of the availability of the Preliminary EA for a 30-day comment period, which is expected to occur between mid-August and mid-September. Once those comments are received, reviewed and incorporated into the Final EA, the EA will be made available along with the Decision and FONSI, if appropriate. An additional inventory flight is currently planned for completion in October 2012 to confirm the population and distribution of the Complex prior to issuance of the Final EA and Decision.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can request in your comment for us to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

The public should be aware that submissions in the form of petitions are not considered comments. Submission of form letters or talking points is typically considered as one comment, since they repeat the same thing and typically originate from single sources.

If you would rather not remain on the mailing list for the Diamond Complex wild horse gather, or you do not wish to receive the EA/Gather Plan and subsequent decision documents, please submit your request in writing to the address identified on the letterhead or the e-mail address given above.

The Preliminary EA will be available to the interested public on compact disk (CD) upon request. However, a request to receive the document electronically will not extend the comment period.

For more information regarding the proposed gather, please contact Shawna Richardson at (775) 635-4181.

Sincerely,



Christopher J. Cook
Field Manager

Enclosures (2)

Diamond Complex Background Information

The Diamond Complex encompasses the Diamond Mountain Range north of Eureka, Nevada, and consists of rolling foothills, valleys, and very steep, narrow canyons along the eastern and western face of the Diamond Range. Elevations range from 5,700 feet in Diamond Valley to 10,660 feet at Diamond Peak. Wild horses are often found near Diamond Peak during the summer and move off the mountain into the valleys and foothills during periods of heavy snowfall. Precipitation is received in the form of several feet of snow in the winter at the higher elevations, and rainfall primarily during the winter and spring months. Average precipitation in the Diamond Valley area is approximately 9.31 inches. Mountains may receive 10-12 inches annually. Central Nevada can experience drought conditions marked by significantly reduced precipitation in the form of winter snowfall that affects springs and stream flow, to limited or absent rainfall in spring, which affects plant growth as well as water availability. Approximately 4 of every 10 years meet the definition of drought throughout much of central Nevada. Currently, most of Nevada is experiencing widespread severe and extreme drought which has resulted in substantially reduced production of forage grasses and water sources needed for wild horses and wildlife on the range.

The Diamond Hills North HMA comprises the northernmost portion of the Complex and is approximately 12 miles long by 12 miles wide encompassing 69,305 acres of public land. The Diamond Hills South HMA is located in the most northeastern tip of the Diamond Mountain Range comprising the smallest portion of the Complex at 21,162 acres of public land. The Diamond HMA is approximately 40 miles long and averages 6-9 miles wide extending from the ridge downslope along the western face of the Diamond Mountain Range, comprising 164,737 acres. Refer to the enclosed map, which displays the HMAs comprising the complex and the associated allotments.

Vegetation types are distributed according to topography, elevation and precipitation. The valley bottoms support large alkali flats supporting salt tolerant plants such as alkali sacaton, inland saltgrass and alkali bluegrass. The foothills support various shrub dominated sagebrush communities with sparse understories of perennial grasses such as Indian Ricegrass, Needleandthread grass and Sandberg's bluegrass. Pinyon-Juniper communities are present throughout the middle elevations. Cottonwood-Aspen stands are common around riparian areas on the Diamond Mountains. Mountain big sagebrush, antelope bitterbrush, snowberry, serviceberry and curlleaf mountain mahogany with an understory perennial grasses dominate the higher elevations. Nevada State identified noxious weeds are present throughout the Complex ranging from infrequent to prevalent and from one species to multiple species infestations.

Wild horses found in the Diamond Mountain Range Complex today originated from privately owned horses and likely have many domestic bloodlines in their background. The predominant colors include sorrel and bay followed by roan, brown, gray, black, palomino and chestnut. The wild horses within the Diamond Complex maintain good body size in excess of 14.2 hands on average, with moderate to heavy muscling, and white leg and face markings. Reports back to the BLM from adopters indicate that these animals have a desirable disposition and report positive outcomes with their Diamond Complex wild horses.

Following the 2004 gather, samples were collected for genetics analysis of the Diamond Complex. The results indicate that genetic variability within the Diamond Complex is average

and allelic diversity is relatively high for a wild horse population. The herd appears to be of mixed origins, and shows relatively high genetic similarity to all major groups of domestic horse breeds as compared to most wild herds, which is consistent with mixed origins. Additional hair samples would be collected during the next gather for follow up analysis of the genetic variation of this Complex.

The Complex includes portions of nine grazing allotments with portions of five allotments specifically identified for removal of wild horses outside of HMA boundaries. Through allotment evaluations and Rangeland Health Assessments, adjustments to livestock grazing systems have been made following analysis of monitoring data and coordination with the interested public. These adjustments include changes to season of use, establishment of use areas, increases or decreases to permitted AUMs, implementation of grazing systems, and Terms and Conditions for the grazing permit. Ongoing monitoring continues to collect data pertaining to rangeland health in these areas in order to further adjust livestock grazing if necessary.

Livestock operators are currently affected by the large numbers of wild horses in the HMAs. Within the Diamond HMA, Permittees have voluntarily reduced livestock use within the HMA, and have adjusted use of certain portions allotments due to the high numbers of wild horses. Substantial reductions to livestock were made through Livestock Decisions following the last evaluation in 2000. Additional adjustments have been made in certain locations within the Diamond HMA to improve riparian areas. The Egan Field Office recently completed Livestock Decisions on all grazing allotments within the Diamond Hills South HMA and areas outside of the HMA affected by wild horses. Adjustments to livestock grazing systems were included as part of these decisions.

Issues:

- The population of the Diamond Complex following foaling in 2012 is estimated to be 393% of the established AML, ranging from 226% to 1,282% across all three HMAs.
- An estimated 232 excess wild horses inhabit a large area that is outside of the HMA boundaries and not designated for use by wild horses.
- Wild horses residing outside of the Diamond Hills South HMA boundary are impacting rangeland health conditions within critical sage grouse habitat, mule deer summer habitat, critical riparian complexes in addition to competing with cattle and domestic sheep grazing.
- Wild horses are contributing to non-attainment of the Standards for Rangeland Health within the Diamond Hills South HMA and outside of the HMA.
- Wild horses outside of HMA boundaries are causing public safety concerns along Nevada State Route 892, where up to 40 horses have been documented concentrating on the road, and two have been reported struck and killed by vehicles in the recent past.
- Preliminary review of monitoring data indicates that wild horses are contributing to non-attainment of Standards for Rangeland Health within the Diamond HMA.

- Within the Complex, the range is being negatively impacted and degraded by an overpopulation of wild horses, consisting of impacts to springs and streams, upland vegetation and trend and the effects of trailing, and trampling.
- The Diamond Mountain Range is inhabited by diverse wildlife and provides important wildlife habitat that is currently being impacted by wild horses.

In order to provide the interested public with additional information, the MLFO will be posting photos of the Diamond Complex wild horses, past gathers, forage and water as well as Frequently Asked Questions and supporting documentation. The items can be accessed on the internet at the following location: http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/battle_mountain_field.html

If you would like a copy sent to you in the mail, have questions or need additional information in order to provide comments and recommendations for this project please contact Shawna Richardson at 775-635-4181.