Frequently Asked Questions About the Diamond Complex Wild Horse Gather

About the gather operations

What standard procedures does the BLM use to assure humane handling and treatment of wild horses and burros during gathers?
The Standard Operating Procedures are outlined in the gather contract, and included within the Environmental Assessments for wild horse and burro 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 also address the feeding, care, sorting, handling, transportation, equipment, communications, animal condition, fertility control, etc. The SOPs are located in Appendix A, in addition to the Agency Expectations for Humane Treatment which outline several additional measures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the wild horses. BLM staff are on-site at gathers at all times to ensure that safe and humane treatment remains top priority in addition to safety of the public, and BLM and Contractor staff.

Bald Mountain HMA gather, January, 2009 – wild mares await release back to the HMA.

Why are you using a helicopter to gather wild horses and burros? I've been told that it is inhumane.
Helicopters have proven to be the safest and most effective way to gather wild horses and burros, safer than roping from horseback or other methods. We work close with our contractors and we are onsite to monitor the gather to assure that the wild horses/burros are gathered in manner that will minimize any injuries or harm.

For example, the contractor's helicopter pilot directs the animals in a manner that allows foals to remain with their mothers. The BLM also prohibits gathering wild horses and burros with a helicopter during the 6 weeks before and the 6 weeks following the peak foaling period which is March through June for most wild horse and burro herds, unless emergency conditions exist or are imminent. Animals are allowed to travel at their own pace for the most part, and if needed due to young, old, or sick animals, the horses are allowed to walk. We also coordinate with veterinarians from the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), who observe the animal health and provide feedback to the BLM.

Two reports completed in 2010 document the humane handling of wild horses during gathers. The participants observed several helicopter removal operations and reported their findings. The first was initiated by the American Horse Protection Association's (AHPA) and titled the Independent Designated Observer Pilot Program, with the report released in October 2010. Four independent credentialed professionals who were academia-based equine veterinarians or equine specialists reported on multiple facets of the BLM gathers including use of the helicopter which they found to be skillfully and appropriately operated and did not overly stress the wild horses. Other observations were that appropriate efforts were taken to reduce stress and ensure care and well being of the wild horses. This report may be accessed here:
http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/info/newsroom/2010/december/NR_12_03_2010A.html

The second report pertaining to BLM wild horse gathers was released by the Department of the Interior Office of the Inspector General in December 2010. This report concluded: "*Our inspection confirmed that wild horse and burro gathers are necessary because BLM lands cannot sustain the growing population of wild horses and burros. The growing population of these animals must be addressed to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance of the authorized uses of the land, thus gathers are necessary and justified actions. Further, we did not observe any inhumane treatment of wild horses and burros*".
This report may be accessed at this location:
http://www.doioig.gov/images/stories/reports/pdf/BLM%20Wild%20Horse%20and%20Burro%20Program%20Public.pdf

In their August 2012 BLM Task Force Report, the American Association of Equine Practitioners concluded that the care, handling and management practices utilized by the BLM are appropriate for this population of horses and generally support the safety, health status and welfare of the animals. This report is available at this location:
http://www.aaep.org/images/files/AAEP%20Report%20on%20the%20BLM%20Wild%20Horse%20&%20Burro%20Program%20Final.pdf

I've read that the horses are traumatized – is this true?
Refer to the reports identified above. Professional observations over the past 35 years indicate the impacts associated with a gather have proven to be temporary in nature. Wild horses adjust to the new environment and 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. Wild horses are however very adaptable and intelligent animals and transition to their new settings. The BLM and contractor staff handle the animals as carefully and gently as possible to help them adjust without fear.

Why do wild horses and burros die during gathers?
During wild horse and burro gathers, animals may die due to injuries sustained during the gather which averages 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.

Wild horses 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 and burros 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.

Is there a veterinarian present during the gathers*?*
A Veterinarian is 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 require treatment occur infrequently during gathers.

Why are you planning to gather in the cold of winter? It is not healthy for horses to be run in the cold.
The Diamond Complex consists of very steep, rugged terrain up to 10,000 feet in elevation. The Mountain Range is also covered with dense Pinyon/Juniper vegetation in many areas, and is transverse by fences. These factors make it more difficult to gather wild horses in the summer months, as they are generally located in higher elevations and are able to seek cover in trees. This could potentially reduce the gather efficiency significantly and affect the number of mares that could be treated with Fertility Control. Additionally, PZP-22 is not as effective if administered in the summer.

By gathering in the winter months, the wild horses are located in the lower elevations, and would not have to travel as far or over as rough of terrain as during summer gathers. Heat and electrolyte imbalance would not be a factor. Gather efficiency and Fertility Control application would be maximized. Wild horses live on the range year round and have adapted to the harsh conditions of both winter and summer. They easily run through deep snow and over rough terrain if they are in good body condition. Most wild horses are in top fitness and not negatively affected by being gathered. When assessing potential adverse effects to wild horses during gathers, the needs or weaknesses of domestic horses are not comparable to wild horses. Wild horses do not become ill or develop respiratory infections from being gathered during winter months. Colds or respiratory issues that may develop at short term holding facilities are related to wild horses being held in a confined setting combined with moist winter conditions and weather changes. Rarely do colds escalate into respiratory infections or pneumonia, and in those rare cases, most horses respond to treatment and do not show lasting effects.