

## **Paymaster and Montezuma Peak Herd Management Area (HMA)**

### **Wild Horse and Burro Gather**

### **Questions and Answers**

#### ***About the Montezuma Peak and Paymaster Herd Management Area (HMAs)***

The Montezuma Peak HMA is located west of the town of Goldfield, 26 miles south of Tonopah in Esmeralda County, Nevada. The area is approximately 9 miles wide and 21 miles long, and encompasses approximately 77,931 acres. The majority of the HMA is dominated by shrubs with little grass. The area receives only three inches of precipitation in the valley bottoms and 12 inches on the mountain tops. This HMA is in the transition zone between the Great Basin (cold desert) and the Mojave Desert (hot desert). Habitat in the Montezuma Peak HMA is well suited for wild burro use, but contains little forage suitable for wild horses.

The Paymaster HMA is less than five miles north of the Montezuma Peak HMA and seven miles west of Tonopah in Esmeralda County comprising approximately 100,500 acres. Few fences exist across much of the area, which allow the wild horses unrestricted movement areas outside the HMA boundaries as well as the adjacent Montezuma Peak HMAs. Because of steep terrain, limited forage, and few accessible perennial waters, wild horses generally reside in the Montezuma Allotment outside the boundaries of the HMA.



*Paymaster Canyon, Paymaster HMA. February 2010*

#### ***Description of the Environment***

The proposed gather area is located west and south of Tonopah, Nevada within Esmeralda County. The area covers more than 320,000 acres, varying from playas and salt desert shrub plant communities to pinyon-juniper and low sagebrush communities on Montezuma Peak. Elevations range from over 9,000 feet in the mountains to 4,800 feet in the valley floors. The area receives only 3-5 inches of precipitation in the valley bottoms and 12 inches on the mountain tops. The weather station at the Tonopah Airport shows an average annual precipitation during the period of record (1954-2009) of just 5.08 inches. The Magruder Mountain rain gauge reflects an even lower annual average since 1985 of just 3.51 inches.

The majority of the Montezuma Peak HMA is dominated by shrubs with little grass, particularly in dry years. Perennial grasses comprise ten percent or less of the total vegetative production throughout the HMA. Habitat in the Montezuma Peak HMA is well suited for wild burro use, but contains little forage suitable for wild horse use.

Because of steep terrain, limited forage, and few accessible perennial waters, the Paymaster HMA itself receives little actual use by wild horses, which reside in the Montezuma Allotment outside the boundaries of the HMA. A large portion of the HMA is comprised of salt desert shrub vegetation. Perennial grasses comprise less than twenty percent of the potential natural community of these sites which are poorly suited for wild horse or livestock grazing.

This Proposed Gather Area is located within the transition zone between the Great Basin (cold desert) and the Mojave Desert (hot desert). Extremes in precipitation from year to year tend to be more pronounced in Esmeralda County than in northern Nevada or southern Nevada because this region is influenced by an orographic rain shadow of the California Sierra and by two different weather patterns (Continental Tropical and Maritime Polar). This causes highly variable precipitation, by year and by season. The effect of drought on this area can be pronounced when both weather patterns are weak for their respective traditional season. Likewise, rainfall well in excess of “normal” can result from a strong winter (maritime) pattern followed by a strong summer (continental) pattern. Soils and vegetation within the region reflect the arid conditions. Winters are characterized by light to moderate snowfall and cold



*Key Area 3, outside of the Paymaster HMA boundaries.*

temperatures. Summers are usually hot and dry. Afternoon thundershowers may occur in late summer and fall. The mean annual temperature in Tonopah is 53 degrees Fahrenheit. January temperatures reach a low of 18 degrees Fahrenheit and July temperatures can reach 92 degrees.

High temperatures during the summer months produce virgas, dust devils and microburst activities. Flash flood potential during the summer months is high. Central Nevada has many windy days because the geographical location favors the development of high and low pressure zones.

Drought is a recurrent feature of arid central Nevada, and should not be confused with aridity. Drought has been defined as a period when precipitation is less than 75 percent of the average

amount (Society for Range Management 1989) while aridity refers to areas of low rainfall that are a permanent feature of climate.

Using this definition, from 1944 to 1984 drought occurred in 17 of 40 years in the southwestern United States (Holecheck et al. 1995). On average, drought conditions occur one of every 3-4 years within the Paymaster/Montezuma Peak Proposed Gather Area. Klages (1942) concluded that “even slight reductions from normal precipitation can cause severe reductions in plant yield in areas below 300 mm (11.81 inches) of precipitation. Two or more consecutive years of drought have far more impact on vegetation than one year of drought followed by normal or above-normal precipitation.

### ***Why is the BLM gathering the Montezuma Peak and Paymaster HMAs?***

- Attributes of the region including inherently low precipitation, undeveloped soils and unproductive vegetation communities resulting in lack of suitable habitat, especially for wild horses.
- Large portions of the Paymaster and Montezuma Peak HMAs are “dry” with no water available for wild horses or burros, and many areas are inaccessible due to steep terrain.
- History of emergency gathers in the region.
- History of poor wild horse health and Henneke body condition scores of 3 (thin) or less.
- The 2010 aerial inventory documented 69-71 percent of wild horses and burros residing outside of HMA boundaries.
- The existing and estimated post foaling 2010 population exceeds the established AMLs (41 wild horses and 10 burros) as established through Final Multiple Use Decisions (FMUDs).

Additionally, we are mandated to manage wild horses and burros within the HMAs and to remove excess horses and burros. In managing the wild horse and burro populations, we set Appropriate Management Level (AMLs) to maintain healthy herds and healthy rangeland. Achievement of AML is needed to prevent diminishing animal health due to a lack of forage and water, and to maintain healthy vegetative communities that provides important habitat to other wildlife as well.

The AML for the Paymaster HMA was established at 28 wild horses and the AML for the Montezuma Peak HMA at 3 wild horses and 10 wild burros. The most recent helicopter population inventory flight of the Montezuma Peak and Paymaster HMAs was conducted in February, 2010 which resulted in a direct count of 129 wild horses and 61 wild burros with 132 of the 190 animals observed (69 percent) located outside of the HMA boundaries. The post foaling populations will increase to an estimated 81 wild horses and 71 wild burros within and outside of the Montezuma Peak HMA and 68 wild horses within and outside of the Paymaster HMA based on an average annual increase of 16 percent, which exceed the established AMLs by 108 wild horses and 61 wild burros.

The region is very arid, with inherently low annual rainfall and sporadic precipitation patterns. The soils are poorly developed, and the vegetation communities limited in the ability to produce

forage for grazing animals. Through the history of the Montezuma Peak and Paymaster HMAs, wild horses and to a lesser extent wild burros, have not maintained adequate body condition due to the inherent nature of the environment characterized by scarce forage and water in this region. Two emergency gathers were conducted in the Montezuma Peak and surrounding HMAs in 1996 due to a lack of forage as a result of consecutive years of drought. The wild horses were emaciated and wild burros were stressed.

The AMLs were established in consideration of the inherent low precipitation and subsequent low producing vegetation communities, frequent drought and lack of suitable habitat for wild horses. The AMLs also were established to protect key forage and prevent wild horse and/or burro emergencies.



*Paymaster HMA, 2006*

### ***What is the Proposed Action and other alternatives considered in the Preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA)?***

#### **Proposed Action**

- Montezuma Peak HMA: Capture and remove approximately 61 burros and 78 wild horses; leave a post gather population of 10 burros and three horses inside the HMA boundary.
- Paymaster HMA: Capture and remove approximately 45 wild horses; leave a post gather population of approximately 23 wild horses within the HMA.

#### **Alternative 1**

- Montezuma Peak HMA: Same as for the Proposed Action.
- Paymaster HMA: Capture approximately 65 wild horses; and return 13 studs and 7 mares to the HMA, for a post gather population of 23 animals (adjusting sex ratios).

#### **Alternative 2**

- Montezuma Peak HMA: Same as for the Proposed Action.
- Paymaster HMA: Same as for Alternative 1, with the exception that the 7 mares would be treated with fertility control.

#### **Alternative 2 (No Action)**

- No gather or removal of wild horses or burros.

The BLM also considered several other alternatives but didn't fully analyze them because they didn't meet the purpose and need of the EA or were unfeasible.



*Release of wild horses back to the range. Rocky Hills HMA – January 2009*

### **Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis**

Through completion of EAs for proposed wild horse gathers in Nevada in 2009 and 2010, several alternatives have been proposed by the interested public. Some of the more pertinent ones are discussed below. No other Alternatives developed based on comments received during the scoping period for the Proposed Montezuma Peak/Paymaster Gather.

### **Gathering the Montezuma Peak HMA below AML**

The AML for the Montezuma Peak HMA is 3 wild horses and 10 wild burros as determined through FMUDs completed for the allotments within the HMA. The AML is low due to the limited ability for the habitat to provide adequate forage and water for larger numbers of animals while ensuring healthy animals and improved rangeland health. Because the AML is already low, it was determined that reducing the population below these levels is not warranted at this time. Future monitoring would document the status and growth rates of this herd, and be applied to future management actions to adjust the population or the AML.

### **Control the excess wild horses with only the use of fertility control treatment**

An alternative to gather a significant portion of the existing population and implement fertility control treatments only, without removal of excess horses or burros would not result in attainment of the AMLs for the Montezuma Peak or Paymaster HMAs. Fertility control has not been developed for use on wild burros. The wild horse population would continue to increase, adding to the current wild horse overpopulation, albeit at a slower rate of growth. Currently 69-71 percent of the wild horses and burros exist outside of HMA boundaries. This alternative would not decrease the existing overpopulation of wild horses or burros and would not remove wild horses or burros from outside of the HMAs designated for their use, which are the primary purpose and need for the Proposed Gather. Progress would not be made towards attainment of Rangeland Health Standards or Land Use Plan or Allotment Specific Objectives and resource concerns would continue. Wild horse and burro habitat and animal health would continue to be at risk. This alternative would not meet the Purpose and Need identified in Section 1.3, and did not receive any further consideration.

### **Remove or Reduce Livestock within the HMAs**

This alternative would involve no removal of wild horses or burros and instead address the excess wild horse and burro numbers through the removal or reduction of livestock within the HMA. This alternative was not brought forward for analysis because it is inconsistent with the

Tonopah RMP objectives, Montezuma Complex, Monte Cristo, Magruder Mountain, Yellow Hills and Sheep Mountain FMUDs and is inconsistent with multiple use management.

The proposal to reduce livestock would not meet the Purpose and Need identified in Section 1.3 and is not consistent with the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act, which directs the Secretary to immediately remove excess wild horses and burros. Analysis of population inventory and monitoring data resulted in the determination that limited forage resources are available within the Montezuma Peak and Paymaster HMAs, particularly for wild horses and 69-71 percent of the populations of wild horses and burros have left the HMAs in search of forage and water. AMLs established through the above referenced FMUDs were based on conservative allocations in order to maintain healthy animals at thriving natural ecological balance and allow for improvement to rangeland health. Under this alternative, wild horses and burros would continue to exist outside of HMA boundaries in areas that are not designated for their use.

Livestock grazing can only be reduced or eliminated following the process outlined in the regulations at 43 CFR § 4100. Such changes cannot be made through a wild horse or burro gather decision. Changes in forage allocations between livestock and wild horses and burros would have to be re-evaluated and implemented through the appropriate decision-making processes to determine whether a thriving natural ecological balance could be achieved at a higher AML and in order to modify the current multiple use relationship established in the RMPs.

These grazing allotments have been evaluated for Rangeland Health. These processes were completed with public involvement and resulted in data interpretation and carrying capacity analysis, which determined the number of AUMs to be allocated to wild horses, burros and livestock. These management actions were finalized in the FMUDs following public comment which included reductions in the permitted use for 3 of the 5 allotments equating to a 23 percent reduction in AUMs. Grazing systems were implemented and various rest seasons mandated to ensure progress towards RAC Standards for Rangeland Health and RMP/Allotment Specific Objectives. Many of the areas within the Montezuma Peak and Paymaster HMAs are not suitable for large amounts of use by livestock and little use within the HMAs occurs. Refer to Section 3.3 and the documents identified in Section 1.7 for more details.

While the BLM is authorized to remove livestock from HMAs “*if necessary to provide habitat for wild horses or burros, to implement herd management actions, or to protect wild horses or burros from disease, harassment or injury*” (43 CFR § 4710.5), this authority is usually applied in cases of emergency and not for general management of wild horses or burros.

For these reasons, this alternative was dropped from detailed analysis and this Gather Plan and EA would not involve reductions of permitted livestock or increases of the established AMLs. Allocations to livestock, wild horses and burros would be re-evaluated in future years and implemented through appropriate decision and environmental analysis documents.

### **Use of Bait and/or Water Trapping**

An alternative considered was to accomplish the removal of excess wild horses and burros through the use of bait and/or water trapping as the primary gather method. Water trapping involves the construction of gather corrals, and baiting wild horses or burros into the corrals with the use of water. Specialized one-way gates are often used to prevent the animals from leaving the corral once inside. Bait and water trapping methods are usually only effective in areas where water is limited or absent, resulting in high motivation for wild horses or burros to enter the trap to access them. All other water sources except the water trap source must be fenced off from the horses and burros (and other range users).

This alternative was dismissed from detailed study for the following reasons: (1) the size of the area is too large to use this method; and (2) the presence of water sources on both private and public lands inside and outside the HMA boundaries would make it almost impossible to restrict wild horse and burro access to the extent needed to effectively gather and remove the excess animals.

The large geographic area involved and the extended time necessary for this alternative would result in an increase in gather costs and would make it difficult to limit the gather to a reasonable time. The gather time could be extended to 1-2 months under this alternative. Given the impracticalities of implementing this alternative for such a large geographic area, this alternative was eliminated from detailed study.



*Wild horse outside of the Paymaster HMA, visible in the background. 2004*