

## **Questions and Answers about the Lahontan Herd Management Area Wild Horse Gather**

### ***Why is the BLM gathering the Lahontan Herd Management Area?***

The purpose and need of the gather is to remove approximately 94 excess wild horses from the Lahontan Herd Management Area (HMA) in western Nevada. Based upon a direct aerial population inventory of the HMA conducted in May 2010, there are approximately 104 wild horses existing within and outside of the boundaries of the HMA. This action is needed in order to achieve a population size within the established AML, protect rangeland resources from further deterioration or impacts associated with excess wild horses within the HMA, and restore a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship in the area as authorized under Section 3(b) (2) of the *Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971* (1971 WFRHBA).

The current wild horse population of approximately 104 is more than 15 times the low range Appropriate Management Level (AML) of 7 horses and about 10 times the land's full carrying capacity or high range AML of 10 horses. Low range of AML is the minimum herd population level; high range AML is the maximum population level that can be sustained by the land in conjunction with other land uses.

### **Lahontan Environmental Assessment Questions**

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

The Proposed Action is to conduct a gather and remove approximately 94 excess wild horses that exist within and outside the boundaries of the HMA. A direct aerial population inventory of the HMA was conducted in May 2010. The count was 104 wild horses outside of the boundaries of the HMA. Wild horses were observed in the Lahontan Grazing Allotment (LGA) north and east of the HMA, and in Lahontan State Recreation Area (LSRA) north of the HMA. No wild horses were observed within the HMA during the aerial inventory. Utilization and wild horse sign clearly indicate that heavy use is occurring throughout the HMA, likely leading to the movement of horses to areas outside of the HMA boundaries in search of forage.

Wild horses can move freely into and out of the HMA as there is no continuous fencing that would prevent such movement. In order to access water, wild horse movement outside the HMA boundaries into the LSRA is expected, as there are no available water sources for the horses within the HMA. However, due to the current overpopulation of wild horses, which is approximately 10 times above the upper limit of AML, wild horses are not just accessing water outside the HMA boundaries, but remaining outside the HMA boundaries since forage within the HMA is insufficient to sustain their current numbers.

The Proposed Action is designed to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship between the wild horse population, wildlife, livestock and plant communities within the HMA. Conducting a gather at this time is necessary to resolve the issues of over-utilization of vegetative resources within the HMA.

**No Action Alternative:** Under the No Action Alternative, a gather to remove excess wild horses would be deferred and would not take place in November or December 2010. In two years, the wild horse population could exceed 162 head, which is approximately 16 times above the upper range of AML. Damage to the range within the HMA would continue to increase, as wild horse populations can grow at an average rate of 20 to 25 percent per year. Under the No Action Alternative, BLM would continue to monitor range health and wild horse populations, but would not remove excess horses.

The No Action Alternative would not be in conformance with existing laws and regulations, which require the Authorized Officer to remove the animals immediately upon determination that excess wild horses are present. However, the No Action Alternative is required by NEPA to provide a baseline for impact analysis.

The No Action Alternative is not in conformance with the CRMP or with BLM's mandate to manage for healthy rangelands. The horse population has already exceeded the capacity of the HMA to provide forage. As the population increases there is increased pressure on, and impacts to, the rangeland outside the HMA boundaries in the LSRA and LGA.

#### *Alternatives Considered But Eliminated From Detailed Analysis*

**Water Trapping:** An alternative considered but dismissed from detailed analysis was the use of water trapping as the primary gather method. This alternative was dismissed from detailed study because wild horses obtain water from the Lahontan Reservoir therefore restricting access to the water source is not feasible in order to water trap the horses.

#### **Gather and Remove Excess Wild Horses and Apply Two-Year PZP on a Three Year**

**Gather Cycle:** This alternative is not practical in order to ensure a viable population due to the small AML (7-10 animals) and significant overpopulation of wild horses that currently exists. This alternative was therefore eliminated from further consideration.

**Remove or Reduce Livestock Grazing within the HMA:** This alternative would still involve removing the majority of wild horses as they have established home ranges outside of the HMA. This alternative was not brought forward for detailed analysis because it is outside of the scope of the analysis, and is inconsistent with the decisions incorporated in the Consolidated Resource Management Plan (CRMP) and the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, which directs the Secretary to immediately remove excess wild horses, and is inconsistent with multiple use management. *Livestock grazing can only be reduced or eliminated following the process outlined in the regulations found at 43 CFR Part 4100 and would require a change in the CRMP.* Such changes to livestock grazing cannot be made through a wild horse gather plan. Furthermore, there has been no livestock grazing within the HMA for over three years due to insufficient forage resulting from heavy utilization of vegetative resources by the excessive numbers of wild horses present within the HMA. For these reasons, this alternative was eliminated from further consideration.

**Wild Horse Numbers Controlled by Natural Means:** This alternative would use natural means, such as natural predation, to control the wild horse population. This alternative was eliminated from further consideration because it is contrary to the WFRHBA which requires the BLM to prevent the range from deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild horses. It is also inconsistent with the CRMP, which directs BLM to manage wild horses in the Lahontan HMA for a thriving natural ecological balance. The alternative of using natural controls to achieve a desirable AML has not been shown to be feasible in the past. In addition, wild horses are a long-lived species with documented foal survival rates exceeding 95% and they are not a self-regulating species. This alternative would result in a steady increase in the wild horse population which would continue to exceed the carrying capacity of the range until severe or unusual conditions that occur periodically-- such as blizzards or extreme drought-- cause a catastrophic mortality of wild horses in the HMAs. Before such catastrophic mortality occurs, the overpopulation of wild horses would adversely affect wildlife habitat as native plants decline and the establishment and expansion of non-native and noxious weeds is facilitated by poor rangeland health.

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

One or two gather sites (traps) would be used to gather wild horses both from within or outside the boundaries of the HMA. The gather is anticipated to take two days to complete.

***Description of the Environment***

The HMA is located mostly within the Lahontan Grazing Allotment (LGA), and is south of the Lahontan Reservoir and the Carson River Delta. There are no water resources such as springs or creeks within the HMA and wild horses therefore access water at the Lahontan Reservoir. The average elevation is approximately 4,500 feet above sea level. The dominant vegetation consists of Bailey's greasewood (*Sarcobatus baileyi*), shadscale (*Atriplex confertifolia*), bottlebrush squirreltail (*Hesperashpa cormata*), Indian ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*), and needle-and-thread (*Elymus elymoides*).

Annual precipitation averages 7.5 inches per year. Most of this precipitation comes during the winter and spring months in the form of snow and rain, supplemented by localized thunderstorms during the summer months. Temperatures range from greater than 100 degrees Fahrenheit (°F) in the summer months to 0°F in the winter however, for the most part temperatures range from a low of 23 to a high of 94°F depending on the month.

The area is also utilized by livestock (under terms and conditions outlined in grazing permits) and wildlife. Due to insufficient forage availability, livestock grazing has not occurred on the Lahontan Grazing Allotment since March 2007.

***Will BLM remove all the horses that are gathered?***

If more than 94 horses were gathered, a sufficient number of wild horses would be released back into the HMA to ensure a population at the upper limit of AML.

***Does the BLM use fertility control?***

Fertility control is not a practical population control method to use on the Lahontan HMA due to the small AML (7-10 animals) and significant overpopulation of wild horses that currently exists.

***How does the BLM gather horses?***

The BLM uses a private 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 Parada, a domesticated horse, to move the excess horses into the corrals. If needed, the ground crew may assist the helicopter by roping the horses from horseback.

Wild horses gathered would be transported from the gather sites to a temporary holding corral in goose-neck stock trailers or single-deck semi-tractor trailers. At the temporary holding facility, the wild horses would be aged and sorted into different pens based on sex. The wild horses would be provided an ample supply of good quality hay and water. Mares and their unweaned foals would be kept in pens together. Any wild horses identified for retention would be penned separately from those animals identified for removal as excess.

At the temporary holding facility, a veterinarian would provide recommendations to the BLM regarding care, treatment, and if necessary, euthanasia of the recently captured wild horses. Any animals affected by a chronic or incurable disease, injury, lameness or serious physical defect (such as severe tooth loss or wear, club foot, and other severe congenital abnormalities) would be humanely euthanized using methods acceptable to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

***Why does the BLM use helicopter to gather horses - isn't that 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 motorized vehicles to transport gathered animals. 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 (FY) 2004-2008 with a mortality rate of less than one half of one percent.

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 less than a third of the time of traditional water or horseback trapping methods.

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

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 Lahontan HMA Wild Horse Gather, gathering on horseback would not be effective due to the difficulty of moving horses through the extensive riparian area along the Carson River, nor would the use of water trapping be effective means because 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 water trap sites.

***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 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. The BLM Nevada State Office held a public hearing on July 1, 2010. BLM reviewed its Standard Operating Procedures in response to the views and issues that were raised at the public meeting and determined that no changes to the SOPs were warranted.

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

It is not currently, but could become, due to limited forage and water resources on public land. If this population management action is not completed in the near future, the likelihood of an emergency situation increases due to limited winter forage and reduced water availability caused by excess wild horses and severe weather conditions.

***How many horses would be removed?***

Approximately 94 horses would be removed. If more than 94 horses were gathered, a sufficient number of wild horses would be released back into the HMA to ensure a population at the upper limit of AML.

***What happens to the horses that don't go back to the range?***

The excess wild horses removed from the range will be shipped to a short-term holding facility in Palomino Valley, 23 miles north of Sparks, Nevada, to be prepared for the BLM wild horse adoption program or for long-term pastures. They will be checked by a veterinarian and receive vaccinations and freeze marks.

Currently there are more than 30,000 wild horses and burros maintained at short and long-term holding facilities and pastures. In the case of long-term holding pastures, un-adopted and unsold horses live out the rest of their lives in these grassy prairie-land areas of the Midwest, and are cared for by contractors. Animals are held between 10 and 25 years depending on their age when they enter lifetime holding. In contrast, only a small percentage of wild horses roaming public rangelands live past the age of 15 because of the harsher living conditions.

**Population Questions**

***What is the current population of the herd?***

The current wild horse population for the HMA is approximately 104, which is more than 15 times the low range AML of 7 horses and about 10 times the land's full carrying capacity or high range AML of 10 horses.

## **Contractor Questions**

### ***How does the BLM select its gather contractors?***

The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded in 2006 following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review was evaluation of the prospective contractor's knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle wild horses and burros in a safe, effective and humane manner. The BLM's contractors have demonstrated the knowledge, skill and ability to gather and handle these animals safely, effectively and humanely.

### ***What contractor will be conducting the Lahontan gather?***

Sun Jay of Vernal, Utah.

## **Range/Grazing Questions**

### ***How does the BLM determine if the range has deteriorated – is there sound science involved?***

Yes, the BLM conducts monitoring of public lands for vegetation condition, forage and water availability and wildlife habitat condition. The Proposed Action in the Environmental Assessment is consistent with maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance between the wild horse population, wildlife, livestock and vegetation, and to protect the range from the deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild horses.

For decades, the BLM has hired rangeland management specialists, wildlife biologists, as well as wild horse and burro specialists, whose expertise is used to monitor and assess rangeland conditions on public lands.

### ***What are the drought conditions like in this area?***

The West has been in a drought for more than a decade. In the Great Basin high desert of Nevada, where this HMA is located, the average annual precipitation is often less than 10 inches. Drought conditions can occur as frequently as 6 out of every 10 years. Climate data from the National Weather Service shows that precipitation for the current water year (beginning October 1, 2009) is approximately 30 percent below the thirty-year average.

### ***Is there livestock grazing in this area?***

The HMA is within the larger Lahontan Grazing Allotment, made up of Federal and private lands. Livestock use has already been adjusted and decreased due to on-going drought conditions within the area (*there has been no livestock grazing within the HMA since March 2007*).

### ***Is the BLM removing excess wild horses and burros merely to increase livestock grazing use?***

No. The fact is that there has been a 43 percent reduction in authorized livestock use on public lands since 1941.

***Where do the horses within this HMA go for water?***

There are no water sources within the HMA; these wild horses move off Federal public lands to utilize water from the nearby Carson River and Lahontan Reservoir within Lahontan State Recreation Area (LSRA), a unit of the Nevada State Parks system. Wild horses also move out of the HMA into the larger Lahontan Grazing Allotment (LGA) for foraging.

***Does wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?***

Yes, it can. A wide variety of wildlife species common to the Great Basin ecosystem can be found in the Lahontan HMA. These include mule deer, coyote, black-tail jackrabbit, desert cottontail, bobcat, and numerous raptors, reptiles, and other small mammals. As part of its multiple-use mission, the BLM is mandated to protect habitat to support these wildlife species.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure. Continuous grazing does not allow plants sufficient time to recover from grazing impacts. Such overgrazing results in reduced plant health, vigor, reproduction, and ultimately to a loss of native forage species from natural plant communities. Over time, this greatly diminishes habitat quality as abundance and long-term production of desired plant communities is compromised. If wild horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

***Why don't you just make more land available to the horses?***

The BLM would need approval from Congress to expand herd areas for wild horses. By law, wild horses can only be managed on areas of public lands where they were known to exist in 1971, at the time of the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

**Adoption Questions**

***How can I adopt one of the horses?***

The excess wild horses and burros removed from the range are offered for adoption to qualified people through the BLM's Adopt a Wild Horse or Burro Program. Potential adopters must have the proper facilities and financial means to care for an adopted animal, and we always hope that they have experience working with a wild horse or burro, which will help ensure the gentling process.

During the first year, the government retains title to the animal(s), and will conduct compliance checks throughout the year in an effort to ensure as much as possible that the animal is properly being cared for and has gone to a good home. At the end of the first year, if the adopter has complied with all the adoption stipulations and has properly cared for their mustang or burro for one year, he or she is eligible to receive title, or ownership, from the Federal government.

The BLM has placed nearly 225,000 wild horses and burros into private care since the adoption program began in 1971.

To apply to adopt a wild horse or burro on-line, please go to the BLM's adoption website at: [http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild\\_horse\\_and\\_burro/What\\_We\\_Do/wild\\_horse\\_and\\_burro\\_0.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/What_We_Do/wild_horse_and_burro_0.html). If you are interested in adopting directly from one of the BLM's holding facilities, please visit the agency's facilities page.

For more information about the BLM's Adopt-A-Horse or Burro program, please visit [http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild\\_horse\\_and\\_burro.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro.html), or you may call 1-800-4Mustangs with any questions about the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.

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