

**December 27, 2010**

## **Commonly Asked Questions and Answers about the Eagle, Chokecherry, and Mt. Elinore Herd Management Areas Wild Horse Gather**

### ***Why is the BLM gathering the Eagle, Chokecherry and Mt. Elinore Herd Management Areas?***

The gather is necessary to achieve and maintain the appropriate management level (AML) of wild horses in the three herd management areas (HMA) and prevent further deterioration of the rangelands resulting from the current horse overpopulations. Removing the excess wild horses will help to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship as required under the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, and Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. Removing the excess wild horses will also make “significant progress towards achievement” of Mojave-Southern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council (RAC) Standards for Rangeland Health in addition to conforming to the Ely Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Pinyon Management Framework Plan (MFP).

### ***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. Riparian assessments, utilization monitoring and trend data indicate excessive wild horse use is contributing to degradation of rangeland resources including damage to water sources, riparian areas (these are water sources such as stream and creek banks, seeps) and overutilization of forage at higher elevations. The Action is consistent with maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance between wild horse and burro populations, wildlife, livestock and vegetation, and to protect the range from the deterioration associated with an overpopulation of wild horses and burros.

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 is the current population of the wild horse herds?***

There are currently more than 714 wild horses in the Eagle HMA. Appropriate Management Level (AML) for the Eagle HMA is 100-210 wild horses. There are currently 85 wild horses in the Chokecherry HMA where the AML is 30 wild horses; and 79 wild horses in the Mt. Elinore HMA where the AML is 15-25 wild horses.

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

Yes, the Eagle HMA includes portions of nine livestock grazing allotments, both cattle and sheep. Livestock use has been reduced in recent years in a majority of the allotments, partly because of persistent drought. Livestock use is in compliance with the grazing systems outlined in the final multiple use decisions, agreements and term permit conditions that provide for periodic rest and deferment of key range sites.

The Chokecherry HMA includes portions of four livestock grazing allotments and five allotments occur in whole or in part within the Mt. Elinore HMA. Premitted livestock grazing use in the HMAs includes both cattle and sheep grazing during all seasons of the year. Since the last wild horse gather in 2007,

licensed livestock use, or actual use, has generally been less than permitted use for each of the grazing allotments, in part due to persistent drought.

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

The Eagle, Chokecherry and Mt. Elinore herd management areas (HMA) are prone to drought every few years. Annual average precipitation in the HMAs varies from approximately 14 inches at the higher elevations to 8 inches or less at the lower elevations. Precipitation occurs mostly in the winter in the form of snow with sparse summer moisture. Summer rains are localized, short and very intense while winter/spring rains are gentler and over a wider area. Water sources are limited to a very few natural springs and man-made wells. There are also a few small perennial streams within the HMAs.

***How many wild horses will be gathered?***

The BLM will gather and remove approximately 748 excess wild horses from in and around the Eagle, Chokecherry, and Mt. Elinore herd management areas, beginning in January.

***Why doesn't the BLM gather to the high range of AML?***

The foal crop that will arrive in the spring will increase herd sizes by 20% on average, pushing herd populations once again over AML within weeks of the gather. The rangelands will continue to worsen and the need to gather to AML will arise again.

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

Yes, if more than 748 wild horses are gathered, selective removal criteria would be used to return horses to the range. Of the horses remaining on the range, BLM would conduct fertility control measures on mares and/or adjust the sex ratios of the gathered animals to be returned to the HMA to 60 percent male/40 percent female ratios.

The BLM has promoted and supported the development of an effective contraceptive agent for wild horses since 1978. The most promising agent is a Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) vaccine that was developed in the 1990s, but is not commercially available. The PZP vaccine is used by BLM in cooperation with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) under a research protocol.

***Where are the Eagle, Chokecherry and Mt. Elinore Herd Management Areas?***

The 670,000-acre Eagle Herd Management Area (HMA) is located in Lincoln County, Nev., about 50 miles southeast of Ely. The 38,995-acre Chokecherry and 34,047-acre Mt. Elinor HMAs are located in western Beaver and Iron counties, Utah, adjacent to the Eagle HMA. The Eagle HMA is managed by the BLM Ely (Nevada) District, Schell Field Office and the Chokecherry and Mt. Elinore HMAs are managed by the BLM Color Country (Utah) District, Cedar City Field Office.

***Description of the Eagle, Chokecherry and Mt. Elinore Herd Management Areas***

All three herd management areas (HMA) consist of large mountain ranges bounded by valleys. Elevations range from about 5,673 feet in the valleys to as high as 9,296 feet on Mt. Wilson. The three HMAs afford a classic Great Basin environment marked by extremes of almost every kind. Summertime temperatures can exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and winter lows can fall well below zero or lower. Vegetation in the HMAs is characteristic of the Great Basin with dominant plants having evolved to survive the extremes. Typical vegetation varies according to elevation with the upper mountain slopes generally covered with stands Aspen, fir and open meadows. Through the mid elevations, pinion and juniper trees are dominant and often form closed stands which prevent other vegetation from growing. As the elevation and moisture supply falls, the vegetation shifts towards shrub dominated community. Sagebrush is the most common shrub along the pinion juniper perimeter. Sagebrush gives way to white sage, black sage, saltbrush, and other "salt Desert shrub" type communities.

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

Wildlife in the area includes pronghorn antelope, mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats and blacktail rabbits. There are also prairie falcon, ravens, quail, starlings, and horned larks. Reptiles include many species of lizards, poisonous (rattlesnakes) and non-poisonous snakes.

BLM special status species that inhabit the Eagle, Chokecherry and Mt. Elinore HMAs include several species of bats, raptors, and other birds. The Eagle HMA contains 16 known active greater sage-grouse leks, and 5 within or adjacent to the Chokecherry HMA. There are at least 9 known active greater sage-grouse leks within the HMA boundary. Sage-grouse use majority of the Eagle HMA and portions of the Chokecherry HMA year-round. There is potential pygmy rabbit habitat within the Eagle HMA and documented sightings within the Chokecherry HMA. Pygmy rabbits predominately inhabit tall sagebrush with deep friable soils for burrowing.

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 horse populations are not controlled in this area, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

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

The BLM uses a Federal 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 Prada, 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.

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

The BLM's national gather contracts are awarded following an in-depth technical review of the proposals received from the prospective contractors. Among the key elements of the technical review is the 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.

***Why does the BLM use helicopters 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.

A study was conducted recently by four independent, credentialed equine professionals who were selected by the Washington, D.C.-based American Horse Protection Association, whose mission is to protect and preserve wild horses and burros on U.S. public rangelands. The full report, accessible at the BLM's national Website ([www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)), made several observations and findings, including the observation that, in general, "horses did not exhibit undue stress or show signs of extreme sweating or duress due to the helicopter portion of the gather, maintaining a trot or canter gait only as they entered the wings of the trap. Rather, horses showed more anxiety once they were closed in the pens in close quarters; however,

given time to settle, most of the horses engaged in normal behavior...." The report also favorably noted the helicopter's "precision" in gathering horses and burros, comparing it to "a dog working sheep."

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 a third to half 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.

***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.

***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 short-term holding facilities to be prepared for the BLM wild horse adoption program or for long-term holding. 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. New contracts for long-term holding pastures will allow an additional 8,000 head to be cared for in long-term holding pastures, and these pastures will become available in the next couple of months to accommodate the horses gathered in the Eagle, Chokeycherry and Mt. Elinore HMAs, and other gathers. 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.

***Why are these herds being gathered in the winter?***

Winter gathers in this area are preferred as foals are older and wild horses are located at lower elevations, reducing the travel distance to the trap site. Oftentimes, wild horses are located at the highest elevations during the summer months, and therefore, would have to travel over steep terrain to the trap sites. Dense tree cover further increases the difficulty of gathering wild horses during summer months.

The terrain is also rocky, and past experience indicates that fewer injuries to hooves and legs occur during winter gathers in this area. Winter gathers typically result in less stress to wild horses as the cold and snow does not affect horses during the gather to the degree that heat and dust would during summer gathers.

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

Not currently, but here is insufficient herbaceous forage present within the dominant ecological sites to support healthy wild horses. Consequently, wild horses within the HMAs are in moderately thin body

condition (Classes three and four of the Henneke Body Condition Score). As a result, the wild horses are moving outside the HMA boundary in search of food and water.

Heavy utilization of key forage species by wild horses, together with trampling/trailing, bare ground, and limited water sources will cause further resource damage and prevent attainment of rangeland health standards.

***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.

***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\\_burro0.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/What_We_Do/wild_horse_and_burro0.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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