

Questions and Answers about the Triple B Complex Wild Horse Gather

Why is the BLM gathering the Triple B herds?

The proposed gather is needed to achieve and maintain the appropriate management level (AML) of wild horses in the Triple B Complex and prevent further deterioration resulting from the current overpopulation within the three herd management areas (HMAs) and one wild horse territory (WHT) of the complex in northeastern Nevada. The current wild horse population of 2,189 is more than 4.5 times the low range AML of 472 wild horses and about three times the land's full carrying capacity or high range AML of 889 wild horses. (Low range of AML is the minimum herd population level; high range AML is the maximum population level that will help to prevent further deterioration of the range, and achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship.)

Is the BLM removing horses to make room for more cattle grazing?

No. The removal of wild horses and burros from public rangelands is carried out to ensure rangeland health, in accordance with land-use plans that are developed in an open, public process. These land-use plans are the means by which the BLM carries out its core mission, which is to manage the land for multiple uses while protecting the land's resources. Authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed land has declined by nearly 50 percent since the 1940s; of that authorized use, actual livestock grazing use on public rangelands has declined by 30 percent since 1971.

EA/Decision Record Questions

What is the Proposed Action considered in the Final Environmental Assessment (EA)?

The Proposed Action is the removal of excess wild horses, the application of fertility control and the adjustment of sex ratios so that there is a 60 percent male to 40 percent female sex ratio left in the herds.

Gather Process Questions

What is the Gather process?

In November 2010, an inventory flight was conducted over the Triple B Complex. It was determined that a gather was necessary due to the number of excess wild horses observed. A preliminary Environmental Assessment was issued for a 30-day comment period on Jan. 6, 2011. The comment period closed on Feb. 7, 2011. A final EA and Decision Record/Finding of No Significant Impact were issued on May 17, 2011, with gather operations to begin on or about July 1, 2011.

Where would the BLM gather horses?

The BLM would gather and remove approximately 1,726 excess wild horses from the Triple B Herd Management Area (HMA) that is managed by the BLM Ely District, Egan Field Office; Maverick-Medicine HMA and Antelope Valley HMA west of highway 93 which are managed

by the Elko District, Wells Field Office; and the Cherry Spring Wild Horse Territory (WHT) which is managed by the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Ruby Mountains Range District, and those outside the HMAs.

Description of the Environment.

The area is within the Great Basin geographical region, which is one of the largest deserts in the world. The Great Basin is effectively cut off from the westerly flow of Pacific moisture. Crossing air masses created by the Sierra and Cascade mountain ranges provide cooling and precipitate much of the moisture out. The result for most of the Great Basin is a Dry Steppe cold climate classification. The climate is typical of middle latitude, semi-arid lands where evaporation potential exceeds precipitation throughout the year. Precipitation ranges from approximately 7 inches on the valley bottoms to 16 to 18 inches on the mountain peaks. Most of this precipitation comes during the winter months in the form of snow. Temperatures range from greater than 90 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer months to minus 15 degrees in the winter. Elevations within the Complex range from approximately 5,000 feet to 10,000 feet. The Complex is characterized by long wide valleys and long narrow steep mountain peaks covered with heavy pinion pine and juniper woodlands.

Will BLM remove all the wild horses that are gathered?

The BLM is gathering more wild horses than it is removing so it can apply fertility control and release the appropriate proportions of males to females to achieve a sex ratio that is 60 percent males to 40 percent females in the herds. Therefore, the goal is to gather approximately 1,726 wild horses, but, if more are gathered, selective removal criteria would be used to return horses to the range. The actual number of wild horses removed will depend on the overall success of the gather operations, but we have an overall post-gather target population of approximately 472-889 wild horses that would remain within the Complex.

The Proposed Action provides for the following: 1) gather a sufficient number of the total estimated population of 2,189 wild horses, (2) remove approximately 1,726 excess wild horses from within and around the HMAs and WHT, and (3) If a sufficient number of wild horses are gathered beyond the excess wild horses to be removed then apply two year fertility control to any mares released back to HMA and/or adjust the sex ratio to 60 percent males and 40 percent females within the Triple B Complex.

Does the BLM use fertility control?

Yes, 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-22) 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.

How does PZP affect the mares?

The PZP application doesn't interfere with a mare's pregnancy if the vaccine is applied while she is pregnant. The foal will be born normal and healthy. The PZP vaccine will start to take effect while the mare is pregnant, so after the foal is born, the mare will be less likely to become pregnant for about the next two years.

Indications from research conducted on Assateague Island National Seashore (managed by the National Park Service) suggest that PZP does not affect the foaling seasonality. While it remains to be seen if this will hold true on Western rangelands, there is no indication that there are any negative effects on foal survival following treatment of a herd.

How are fertility control and adjusting the sex ratio implemented?

Fertility control treatments and modification of sex ratios of released animals would slow population growth and could increase the time period before another gather would be required. If the gather efficiency exceeds 80 percent (1,758 head) then the following management actions would be implemented to the degree possible while still achieving the low range AML:

- All mares selected for release, including those previously treated with fertility control, would be treated/retreated with a two-year Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP-22) or similar vaccine and released back to the range. Immuno-contraceptive treatment would be conducted in accordance with the approved standard operating and post-treatment monitoring procedures. Mares would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.
- Studs released would be selected to increase the post-gather sex ratio to approximately 60 percent studs in the remaining herds. Studs would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.

Both mares and studs would be removed using a selective removal strategy to the extent possible. Selective removal criteria include:

- (1) First Priority: Age Class - Five Years and Younger
- (2) Second Priority: Age Class - Six to Fifteen Years Old
- (3) Third Priority: Age Class Sixteen Years and Older

Post-gather, every effort would be made to return released wild horses to the same general area from which they were gathered.

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 wild horses into the corrals. If needed, the ground crew may assist the helicopter by roping the wild horses from horseback.

Why does the BLM use helicopters to gather wild 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), 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 wild horses and burros, comparing it to "a dog working sheep."

Though the wild 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 wild 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. The BLM Ely District Office held a public hearing on June 15, 2011. BLM reviewed its Standard Operating Procedures in response to the views and issues raised at that public meeting and determined that no changes to the SOPs were warranted.

Does the BLM use whips to move the horses through the pens and chute?

The BLM uses flags or noise-making paddles to move horses through the pens and chutes. The flags are usually made by attaching a plastic grocery bag to the end of a sorting stick or buggy whip. The flag prevents the stick or whip from hitting the horse with any sort of impact or sting to it. Seeing and hearing the plastic flag motivates the animal to move away from the source of the stimulus. This technique is similar to those used for domestic and wild horses being trained using resistance-free methods.

Why is the BLM removing horses that appear to be or are in good condition?

The BLM gathers horses with different bodily conditions, including some that appear to be or are in good condition. The agency pro-actively gathers excess animals from overpopulated herds on

a three-to-five year cycle to prevent worst-case scenarios in which removed horses would be emaciated because of insufficient forage on the range.

Is this an emergency action?

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

How many horses would be removed?

The proposal is to remove approximately 1,726 excess wild horses from in and around the Triple B Complex. A population of approximately 472-889 wild horses will remain on the range, which is within the appropriate management level established for this area.

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

The excess wild horses will be transported to either the National Wild Horse and Burro Center at Palomino Valley (PVC), in Reno, Nev.; Gunnison Correctional Facility in Gunnison, Utah; or the Delta Wild Horse Corrals in Delta City, Utah, where they will be prepared for the BLM adoption program or for long-term holding. The horses will be checked by a veterinarian, receive vaccinations and freeze marks and will be made available for adoption within a few weeks of arriving at the facility.

The Bureau of Land Management estimates that approximately 38,500 wild horses and burros (about 33,000 horses and 5,500 burros) are roaming on BLM-managed rangelands in 10 Western states based on the latest data available, compiled as of February 28, 2011. Off the range, there are more than 41,000 other wild horses and burros that are fed and cared for at short-term corrals and long-term pastures. (As of May 2011, there were approximately 11,850 in corrals and 29,150 in Midwestern pastures.)

What veterinary treatment will the removed horses receive?

The horses will be aged (based on the condition of their teeth), de-wormed, vaccinated, blood-tested, and freemarked (marked with a cold brand).

What happens to horses that are not adopted?

Unadopted horses are fed and cared for in either short-term corrals or long-term Midwestern pastures. Wild horses over 10 years old and those passed over for adoption at least three times become eligible for sale, a transaction in which the title of ownership to the animals passes immediately from the Federal government to the buyer. (In the adoption process, the title of ownership passes from the Federal government to the adopter after the individual provides one year of humane care.) While a December 2004 law granting the BLM sale authority authorizes the agency to sell sale-eligible animals "without limitation," the Bureau has not been and is not selling any wild horses to slaughterhouses or to "killer buyers." All horses in holding retain their status as "wild" animals and remain under the BLM's protection.

Will any of the horses be sent to slaughter?

No. As noted above, while a December 2004 amendment to the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act authorizes the BLM to sell sale-eligible animals “without limitation,” the BLM has not been and is not selling any wild horses to slaughterhouses or to “killer buyers.”

Why is the BLM removing horses when there are already more than 41,000 animals in holding?

The BLM must remove thousands of wild horses and burros from the range each year to protect public lands from the environmental impacts of herd overpopulation – such as soil erosion, sedimentation of streams, and damage to wildlife habitat. Currently, the Western rangeland free-roaming population of more than 38,000 (as of February 2011) *exceeds by nearly 12,000* the number the BLM has determined can exist in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses. Although the BLM tries to place as many removed animals as possible into private care through adoption or sales, the public’s demand for adoptable wild horses has declined sharply in recent years, leaving the agency in the unsustainable position of gathering excess horses while its holding costs spiral upward. Interior Secretary Salazar and BLM Director Bob Abbey announced a set of proposals in October 2009 that represented the first step in putting the BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Program on a sustainable track (see www.blm.gov for details).

Summer Gather Questions

Why is the BLM using a helicopter to chase and gather WH&B in the summer’s extreme heat?

During the summer, to the extent possible, the BLM tries to limit the gather of WH&B to when temperatures are cooler, in the morning and early afternoon, thus avoiding the heat of the day. Gather sites are selected to shorten the distance animals must travel to the trap to minimize the potential for heat- and dust-related stress. The BLM and the gather contractor also make sure there is plenty of clean water for the animals to drink once they have been captured. The WH&B specialists monitor air temperature throughout gather activities as well as the health of the horses.

The BLM has been conducting WH&B gathers with the assistance of a helicopter since the mid-1970s. During this time, the BLM and the gather contractors have identified and refined a number of standard operating procedures (SOPs). These SOPs are implemented to minimize potential stress and injury to WH&B and to ensure a safe and humane gather occurs.

Isn’t it true that during the summer, foals are small and that a lot of the foals could be orphaned, killed or injured?

During the summer, when foals are smaller, the BLM requires the contractor to herd the animals in a manner that allows foals to remain with their mares. In the event a foal is separated from the band, the pilot will either separate the mare and foal from the band and leave them back, he may abandon the attempt for that group of animals, or he will call for the assistance of a ground crew in order to gather the foal and its mare together.

The BLM also prohibits gathering wild horses with a helicopter during the 6 weeks before and the 6 weeks following the peak foaling period (e.g., March through June for most wild horse herds).

If foals are orphaned during the gather, how does the BLM take care of them?

A small number of foals can be orphaned in any gather. Sometimes foals which have been previously orphaned (abandoned by the mare) are also captured. In either situation, the BLM makes every effort to provide prompt, humane care to orphan foals. The BLM and the gather contractor's crew care for the foal until it can be transported to a BLM holding facility where it will receive the care that it needs. The orphan foals will be fed milk replacer as needed to support their nutritional needs. If necessary, veterinarians may administer electrolyte solutions if the foal is dehydrated. BLM also tries to place orphan foals in an approved foster home to receive the additional care it may need. Once orphan foals are large enough, they are made available for adoption to qualified individuals who can provide them with a good home.

Population Questions

What is the current population of the herd?

The current population of 2,189-plus wild horses for the Triple B Complex is based on an aerial inventory completed in November 2010. The current population is more than 4.5 times the low range AML (472 head) or about three times the high range AML (889 head), which is the maximum level at which a thriving natural ecological balance can be maintained.

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

The foal crop that will arrive in the spring will increase the herd sizes 20-27 percent on average, pushing the 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 very shortly.

Contractor Questions

How does the BLM select its gather contractors?

The BLM's national gather contracts were awarded 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.

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. 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 Proposed 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 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 the Complex is located, precipitation normally ranges from approximately 5-7 inches on the valley bottoms to 16 to 18 inches on the mountain peaks.

Is there livestock grazing in this area?

Yes, there are portions of 27 allotments in the Triple B Complex. However, the permittees have voluntarily reduced their use based on drought, limited forage, wild horse numbers in excess of AML, and horse impacts to existing limited water sources.

Does wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?

BLM special status species that inhabit the Triple B Complex include bald and golden eagles, and ferruginous hawks. The Triple B Complex contains approximately 40 known active greater sage-grouse leks. Sage-grouse use the northern portion of the HMA year-round. Other non-sensitive wildlife species that have been documented within the Complex include pronghorn antelope, mule deer and Rocky Mountain elk. Additional wildlife species common to the Great Basin environment include mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats and blacktail jackrabbits.

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 Question

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. 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, or you may call 1-866-4Mustangs (468-7826) with any questions about the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program.