

BLM Calico Mountains Complex Wild Horse Gather

Fact Sheet: Wildlife and Environmental Considerations

Background

The Calico Mountains Complex (Complex) is in the arid high-desert ecosystem of the Great Basin. Located in northwestern Nevada, it covers about 542,100 acres in Humboldt and Washoe counties north of Reno, Nevada. The Complex includes five Herd Management Areas (HMAs): Black Rock Range East, Black Rock Range West, Calico Mountains, Granite Range, and Warm Springs Canyon.

Elevations within the Complex range from 3,920 feet along the Black Rock Desert to 9,056 feet at Granite Peak. The climate is characterized by warm dry days and cool nights during the summer and extremely cold days and nights during the winter. Annual precipitation is low, ranging from 4 inches at



lower elevations to 16 inches at higher elevations. Most precipitation occurs as winter snow. The current U.S. Drought Monitor classifies northwest Nevada as severe to abnormally dry and drought conditions are expected to persist. Drought impacts are evident throughout the Complex with low forage production and decreased water flows in some areas. Drought conditions occur as frequently as 6 out of every 10 years and have been especially serious in the Complex since the most recent gather in 2005. Long-term data indicate drought conditions since 2006 have resulted in the lowest recorded precipitation since 1985 in some areas and since 1990 in others.

The Calico Complex is in a high desert environment that has experienced drought conditions for several years.

Need for the Gather

The BLM removes excess animals from public lands in order to maintain the appropriate management level (AML) of wild horses. The AML represents the estimated number of wild horses the land can support while maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance with other resources and uses.

Overpopulations of wild horses can overuse the rangelands, threatening the health of native wildlife and plants, reducing water quality, and even threatening the health of the horse herds themselves. Wild horses have no natural predators.

The AML for wild horses in the Complex is 572-952. A direct count of wild horses in the Complex conducted in September 2009 shows a population estimate of 3,040. This is about 5.5 times the low range of the AML (572) or about three times more than the land's full carrying capacity, or high range AML of 952.



This utilization cage shows potential for growth versus amount of forage removed by heavy wild horse utilization in non-livestock grazed area.

The gather, planned for December 2009, is consistent with the provisions Congress provided for in the *Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971*, which mandates that the BLM will remove excess wild horses to achieve a population within the established AML, protect rangeland resources from further deterioration associated with the wild horse overpopulation, and achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship in the area.



The gather is timed to precede foaling season. Delaying would pose risks to the animals, some of which may not survive the winter.

What Would Happen if the Gather is Postponed?

- If the gather is postponed for a few months, the BLM would miss a window of time to gather before the foaling season begins in early March, which would push the start of the gather back to mid or late summer. The risk of postponing the gather until summer is that wild horse body conditions would deteriorate and individual animals might not be able to survive the winter.
- The continued and increasing degradation of natural systems caused by excessive horse populations will negatively affect individual wild horses. Most horses in the Complex are not yet showing signs of stress. The BLM proactively manages wild horses to avoid such signs as thin body conditions, poor health, increased parasites and disease. Postponing or eliminating the gather could result in such conditions as populations double or triple.
- If the gather were cancelled, populations of wild horses in the Complex would continue to grow by about 20-27 percent annually. Without a gather and removal, the wild horse population could exceed 6,000 within four years. At this point, range conditions would be decimated and wild horses, wildlife and livestock would not have enough forage or water. Animals would experience extreme suffering and possible death.
- Ecological communities and habitat resources would not be sustainable. Rangeland health would degrade, possibly below biological thresholds, making recovery unlikely if not impossible as cheat grass, medusa head, and other invasive plants dominate the understory, further degrading ecological conditions.

Wild Horse Overpopulations Impact Wildlife and Plants

A wide variety of wildlife species common to the Great Basin ecosystem can be found in the Complex. As part of its multiple use mission, the BLM is mandated to protect habitat to support these native species which also need forage, shelter and water to thrive.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. This constant grazing pressure allows insufficient time for forage plants to recover. Over time, habitat quality is diminished as desired plant communities are severely compromised. If horse populations are not controlled, forage utilization will exceed the capacity of the range.

Seeps, springs and streams also provide important habitat to a number of species in this desert environment. Yet foraging by horses removes plants that protect riparian areas and trampling causes increased sediment in streams and other scarce water sources.



This is an example of heavy use of the riparian area in the Complex, at Burnt Springs.

Wildlife of Special Management Concern

Sage-grouse: The complex contains more than 100,000 acres of key sage-grouse habitat, a BLM sensitive species. Sage-grouse require large expanses of sagebrush with good under stories of forbs and grasses. Sage-grouse habitat also supports many other sage-grass dependent species in the Complex. Horse overpopulations can damage the health and productivity of the plants that support these species.



Low water flows affect this spring and the wildlife dependent on it. Drought conditions are expected to persist.

Aquatic Species: Several streams within the Complex support populations of the federally-listed threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout. If horses are not gathered, the larger ungathered wild horse population would negatively impact Lahontan cutthroat trout in occupied and recovery streams with stream bank trampling, increased sedimentation, reduced vegetation cover, and overall reduced riparian and stream habitat condition.