

BLM Issues Directive to Improve Estimates of Wild Horse and Burro Herd Populations

Following up on a recommendation of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Bureau of Land Management has issued a new directive to its field offices aimed at improving estimates of wild horse and burro herd populations on Western public rangelands.

“This new directive is part of the BLM’s overall effort to implement the recent recommendations of the GAO,” said BLM Director Bob Abbey. Abbey noted that the Bureau has been working with the U.S. Geological Survey’s Fort Collins Science Center to develop methods that will achieve greater accuracy in population counts.

Currently, most BLM field offices in the West use a “direct count” method that involves the counting of each wild horse and burro actually seen during aerial surveys. This method, the GAO concluded in an October 2008 report, results in an undercounting of herd populations. The BLM’s new directive, known as an Instruction Memorandum, seeks to correct this undercount by using two principal methods of survey that account for a range of error.

The two survey methods, which will be implemented in a multi-step process, are known as “simultaneous double-count” with sightability bias correction and “mark-resight” using photographs. The simultaneous double-count uses two observers to independently observe and record data on groups of individual horses. Sighting data are then compared using statistical modeling to estimate the number of horses missed by the two observers. “Mark-resight” uses photographs to record horse band sizes and identify unique natural markings of animals. The observed “marked” animals are then compared to animals seen during a “resight” survey as a basis for estimating population size.

Implementation of these survey techniques will occur over time, as field personnel are trained and become proficient at performing the new tasks. Scientists at the Fort Collins Science Center will continue to work with BLM personnel to aid in the transition from research to management practice.

The new directive can be accessed at:

http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/info/regulations/Instruction_Memos_and_Bulletins/national_instruction/2010/IM_2010-057.html

Further information on the improved counting techniques is available at:

<http://www.fort.usgs.gov/WildHorsePopulations/Counting.asp>