

Questions and Answers

Owyhee Complex Wild Horse Gather
(HMAs to be gathered: Owyhee, Little Owyhee and Rock Creek)

November, 2016

Q. Why is this gather necessary?

A. The helicopter-gather is necessary to prevent a further decline of Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFA) (prime Sage grouse habitat) caused by the impact of wild horse populations in the area.

Q. How many horses will be gathered and how many will be removed from the range?

A. Total number of wild horses gathered in three HMAs: 1,600

- Total number of wild horses removed in three HMAs: 1,100
- Owyhee HMA target: 230 wild horses gathered and 125 removed
- Little Owyhee HMA target: 920 wild horses gathered and 650 removed
- Rock Creek HMA target: 450 wild horses gathered and 325 removed

Q. What will the remaining herd population of this Herd Management Area be?

A. Total number of wild horses remaining in three HMAs: 1,317

- Owyhee HMA: 105 population after removals
- Little Owyhee HMA: 579 population after removals
- Rock Creek HMA target: 298 population after removals

Q. How is wild horse overpopulation affecting Greater sage-grouse and/or their habitat?

A. The gather area is located in SFA. Wild horses are affecting sage-grouse habitat through heavy utilization of upland grasses and meadows used by sage-grouse for nesting and summer brood rearing. Maintaining the existing wild horse over-population, which would increase with each successive foal crop, would result in continued impacts to populations and habitats. Wild horse populations would increase (about 15-25% each year that a gather is postponed). Upland habitats would continue to see locally heavy levels of utilization associated with wild horse use and that use would continue to expand as wild horse populations continue to grow. The resulting decrease in herbaceous vegetation would reduce sage grouse nesting quality.

Q. Is there livestock grazing in this area?

A. Yes, The Bullhead, Little Humboldt, Little Owyhee, Owyhee, Mori, Andrea, Spanish Ranch, Tuscarora and Squaw Valley Allotments, are managed for livestock grazing but portions of these allotments also overlap with HMA boundaries and those overlapping areas are consequently managed concurrently for wild horses. There are a total of seven livestock

operators (permittees) currently authorized to graze livestock in these allotments annually. The total permitted use for these permittees is a combined total of 127,029 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) yearly in the 6 allotments (including on non-HMA lands). An AUM is the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow or its equivalent for one month (43 CFR 4100). All of these allotments consist of various pastures that are grazed seasonally following established grazing systems; however, the season of use may vary (by one to two weeks) annually based upon forage availability, drought conditions and other management criteria.

Based on BLM population surveys, the current adult wild horse population is approximately 2,417 wild horses for the Owyhee Complex. This equates to 27,224 AUMs, which is 15,217 AUMs higher than the HMA carrying capacity of 12,007 AUMs designated for wild horse use.

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

A. 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; actual (as distinguished from authorized) livestock grazing on public rangelands has declined by 30 percent since 1971.

Q. Does the wild horse overpopulation impact wildlife and plants?

A. Common wildlife species within the Complex include coyote, black-tail jackrabbit, desert cottontail, bobcat and numerous raptors, reptiles and other small mammal species. Mule deer and pronghorn antelope are common big game species in the area. Elk are common in the Rock Creek HMA and a small number of elk inhabit the Owyhee HMA primarily during the winter period near Desert Ranch Reservoir. Currently, the overabundant population of wild horses is adversely affecting valuable habitat needed to support both wildlife and wild horses.

Wild horses often graze the same area repeatedly throughout the year. Forage plants in those areas receive little rest from grazing pressure. Continuous grazing by wild horses 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.

Q. What are some of the effects of wild horse overpopulation on Threatened and Endangered Species?

A. Maintaining the existing wild horse over-population, which would increase with each successive foal crop, would result in continued and increasing impacts to threatened and

endangered species populations and habitats. Wild horse populations would increase (about 15-25% each year that a gather is postponed). Upland habitats would continue to see locally heavy levels of utilization associated with wild horse use, which areas of heavy use would continue to expand as wild horse populations continue to grow. Continued heavy grazing would occur on spring meadow systems and creeks adversely effecting sage-grouse and Lahontan cutthroat trout habitats.

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

A. 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 67,000 (as of March 1, 2016) *exceeds by more than 40,300* 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.

Q. How much will this gather cost?

A. The costs for the gather will be calculated at the end of the gather.

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

A. The BLM gathers horses with different body 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.

Q. Where do the removed horses go?

A. Excess wild horses, removed from the range, will be shipped to the National Wild Horse and Burro Center at Palomino Valley just norther of Reno, Nevada where they will be prepared for the BLM’s adoption program or long-term holding in Midwestern pastures.

Q. What happens to horses that are not adopted?

A. 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.

Q. Will any of the horses be sent to slaughter?

A. 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.”

Q. What veterinary treatment will the removed horses receive?

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

Q. Will there be any designated public observers at the trap site?

A. Yes, we are currently looking at locations accessible to the public. Some of the sites may be on private land; we will work with land owners for some form of access.

Q. How far, in relation to the trap site, are the horses and foals being herded?

A. The final location for trap sites will be determined in the field based on conditions and access.

Q. Why does the BLM use helicopters to gather horses?

A. Helicopter-driven gathers have proven to be more humane, effective, and efficient than other types of gather methods when large numbers of animals need to be removed over wide areas or rugged terrain. Helicopters are able to move horses and burros at a proper pace; moreover, helicopter pilots can keep mares and foals together better than a horseback rider and can also better move the animals around such barriers as deep ravines, fences, or roads.

Q. What Contractor will be used for this Gather?

A. Cattoor Livestock Round Up Inc, Nephi, UT

Q. Why is the BLM allowing a federally indicted and convicted contractor to gather the horses?

A. Mr. Dave Cattoor, a contractor whose company has been gathering and removing wild horses on behalf of the BLM since 1975, pled guilty to a misdemeanor count of “Use of Aircraft to Capture Wild Horses” on May 22, 1992. The incident to which he pled guilty occurred while his company was performing work on non-BLM lands for the Duckwater Indian Tribe in Nevada. Tribal members who were involved in the same legal case were later found innocent of all charges stemming from the incident. Mr. Cattoor has met and continues to meet all pertinent Federal regulations, which include certifying that no company employees have been convicted of animal cruelty charges. Mr. Cattoor’s company has consistently demonstrated its ability to safely, effectively, and humanely capture and handle wild horses and burros.

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

A. 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.

Q. How many of the mares gathered during this roundup will the BLM treat with the fertility-control vaccine PZP?

A. The proposed treatment target is 500 mares using PZP-22 once treated, the mares will be returned to the range

Q. How does PZP affect the mares?

A. 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.

Q. Where may I learn more about the Wild Horse and Burro Program?

A. Please visit the BLM's Website at www.blm.gov.