

Questions and Answers for the 2024 Roberts Mountain Complex Wild Horse Gather (October-November 2023)

Q. What is the official name for this gather?

A. 2024 Roberts Mountain Complex Wild Horse Gather

Q. Where and how will the public and/or media know when to go and where to meet each day?

A. Members of the public are welcome to view the gather operations, provided that doing so does not jeopardize the safety of the animals, BLM staff and private observers, or disrupt gather operations.

The BLM will escort the public to gather observation sites located on public lands. Once gather operations have begun, those wanting to view gather operations must call the Roberts Mountain Complex information hotline **nightly no later than 5:00 p.m.** at (775) 861-6700 to **RSVP**. **Observers will receive a call back that night no later than 9:00 p.m.** with details of time to meet and location of meeting time.

If no RSVPs are received by 5:00 p.m., no public viewing will be available the following day.

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

A. Yes. BLM will meet the public **each morning** at a specified location and time to escort them to the gather sites. Limitations will only be imposed to ensure safety and accomplishment of the mission. The “Visitation Protocol” and a “Know Before You Go” handout will be posted on the BLM website, so observers are adequately prepared for protocols expected and the conditions on the gather sites.

Q. Who is the “point of contact” if members of the public have questions while observing the gather?

A. The point of contact, for any members of the public observing the gather, is the BLM public affairs specialist (PAS) or public information officer (PIO) who will be with the public during public observations offered during gather operations both at the trap sights and temporary holding facility.

NOTE: *If the PAO/PIO is unable to answer the “technical” type questions, they will ensure those questions are answered by the appropriate BLM representative assigned to this gather operation.*

Should members of the public want to know details of the “gather operation” each day such as how many animals were gathered, if there were any deaths or what the cumulative numbers are to date, that information will be posted daily, under that 2024 Roberts Mountain Complex Wild Horse gather page located on the BLM Website at <https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/herd-management/gathers-and-removals/nevada>.

BLM policy is that the gather page shall be updated by 9:00 a.m. (PST) the morning following each day of operations. ***NOTE:*** *there may be minimal delays based on service, webpage updates and any other unintended issues.*

Q. What Contractor will be used for this Gather?

A. Shayne Sampson, Sampson Livestock

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 this gather necessary?

A. To restore a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship on public lands, consistent with the provisions of Section 1333(b) of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. The BLM strives to be a good neighbor in the communities we serve; ensuring public safety within and outside of the HMAs is not at risk due to the overpopulation of wild horses and providing opportunities for other wildlife to have a thriving ecosystem.

By balancing herd size with what the land can support, the BLM aims to protect habitat for other wildlife species such as sage grouse, pronghorn antelope, and mule deer. Removing excess wild horses and burros supports significant progress toward achieving the Standards for Rangeland Health identified by the Northeastern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council. The removal of excess wild horses is also needed to remedy public safety and private land nuisance issues that have been ongoing for several years.

The Roberts Mountain Complex is currently 700% above the established AML. In addition to overpopulation, the Complex has also endured many years of drought since the most recent gather in 2008 which has also impacted sensitive resources. Sixty percent (60%) of the existing population is residing outside of HMA boundaries where wild horse use has not been designated, further impacting resources.

Q. In the Roberts Mountain Complex, what herd management areas and herd areas fall within the area of operation?

A. The complex includes the Roberts Mountain, Whistler Mountain, the northern portion of the Fish Creek Herd Management Areas and the Kobeh Valley Herd Area.

Q. What is the appropriate management level (AML) of the Roberts Mountain Complex?

A. The AML for the Complex is 170-184 wild horses.

Q. What are the horses from the Roberts Mountain Complex like?

A. Wild horses of the Roberts Mountain HMA are known for good conformation, size, colors, and behavior characteristics. Wild horses within the Whistler Mountain HMA and Kobeh Valley are similar to those in the Roberts Mountain HMA.

The build of the horses is consistent with a history of domestic ranch stock, with good muscling, strong legs and sizes that often reach more than 15 hands tall. Colors include a large proportion of dun, palomino and buckskin in addition to sorrel, chestnut, bay, roan, brown and black. The RMC horses are highly sought after by adopters.

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

A. The BLM plan is to gather up to 1,106 wild horses, remove up to 1,068 excess wild horses and return up to 38 wild horses back to the range.

Q. Will the BLM implement any population suppression techniques? If so, what method or fertility control drug will be used and how many animals will be treated and released?

A. The BLM plans to treat up to 19 mares with GonaCon Equine, a population suppression fertility control vaccine, before being released back to the range along with up to 19 stallions.

Q. What will the remaining herd population of this herd management area be?

A. The BLM estimates a post gather population of approximately 110 wild horses within the HMA boundaries and 122 wild horses remaining uncaptured outside of HMA boundaries.

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

A. Based on the topography of the area and the current health and body conditions (BCS) of most of the wild horses, the BLM will move animals on an average 2-10 miles towards the trap sites.

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

A. The BLM gathers animals 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.

BLM and contract staff adhere to a Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program during all gather operations, which outlines required best practices and humane handling standards that prioritize the health and well-being of the wild animals during gather operations. Licensed veterinarians are on sight during gather operations; these professionals and other BLM staff assess, many things such as the condition of the animals, each day to determine how the operation will be managed to ensure humane care and handling is the utmost priority of the operation.

In the arid environments of the west, it is very important to maintain balance on the range and prevent, reduce and/or eliminate degradation to rangeland resources to maintain quality habitat for all rangeland users including wild horses.

Q. Will the gather be harmful to the genetic health of the Roberts Mountain Complex?

A. The Roberts Mountain HMA has been sampled for genetic variability in 2001 and 2008. Hair samples were collected from 29 horses during the 2008 gather event and sent to Texas A&M for analysis. The report concluded that the Roberts Mountain HMA has a higher number of variants than the mean for feral herds, with a relatively low number of alleles at risk of loss. Allelic diversity is well above the average for feral herds. The data is consistent with a population that receives occasional input from other herds. Genetic variation, as indicated by observed heterozygosity (H_o) is above the feral mean. Because the population has been consistently growing since 2008, it is unlikely that the horses in the RMC have experienced any meaningful decrease in genetic diversity since horses in the area were last sampled.

The Roberts Mountain HMA horses are most genetically similar with light racing and riding breeds, followed by North American gaited breeds. The report concluded with these recommendations: Current variability levels are high enough that no action is needed at this point. Population numbers are adequate for maintenance of genetic variation for the next several generations and if continued gene flow of the herd with neighboring herds continues, variation levels will likely remain high. (Cothran, 2010).

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

A. The BLM may use flags or noise-making paddles to move animals 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 animal 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 like those used for domestic animals being trained using resistance-free methods.

Q. Why is the BLM removing animals when, as of September 2023, there were already over 60,000 animals in holding?

A. The BLM must remove thousands of wild horses from the range each year to protect public lands from the environmental impacts of herd overpopulation – such as soil erosion, sedimentation of streams, damage to wildlife habitat and the health of all other animals, birds and reptiles that must share the range for long-term survival in regard to the Congressional mandate that the BLM is to oversee public lands as “multiple-use”.

In the case of the Roberts Mountain Complex, excess animals also exist outside the HMAs and HAs and the gather is needed not only to ensure balance on the range and reversal of downward trends, but to also conform to the directives within the BLM policies and achieving the Standards for Rangeland Health identified by the Northeastern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council.

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 over the last 10-15 years, leaving the federal agency in the unsustainable position of gathering excess horses while its holding costs spiral upward.

Q. Where do the removed animals go?

A. Excess wild horses, removed will be shipped to the Axtell Off-Range Wild Horse and Burro Corrals, located in Axtell, Utah, where they will be prepared for the BLM’s adoption and sales programs or sent to long-term holding facilities located mainly in Midwestern pastures.

Q. What veterinary treatment will the removed animals receive?

A. Once the animals arrive at the Axtell, Utah Off-Range Corrals, the crew will allow them to acclimate to domestic feed and monitor them for a period of time. Following, the animals will be aged (based on the condition of their teeth), de-wormed, vaccinated, blood-tested (for Equine Infectious Anemia), freeze-marked (marked with a cold brand) and stallions will be gelded.

Q. What happens to animals that are not adopted?

A. Un-adopted animals are fed and cared for in either short-term corrals or long-term Midwestern pastures. Animals 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. (NOTE: 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.)

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

A. No. 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 and burros to slaughterhouses or to "killer buyers." All animals in holding retain their status as "wild" animals and remain under the BLM's protection.

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

A. Common wildlife species within the Roberts Mountain Complex include sage grouse, pronghorn antelope, and mule deer. Currently, the overabundant population of wild horses is adversely affecting valuable habitat needed to support both native wildlife and wild horses.

Wildlife and wild horses, that utilize the lands 365 days a year are considered "non-discretionary" uses while there are guidelines related to "discretionary" uses such as livestock grazing, mining and recreation that will not allow those uses unless "trends" allow the utilization.

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.

Over 60% of the existing population is existing outside of designated Herd Management Areas and are impacting resources in areas that are not designated for wild horses. These impacts include negative impacts to riparian areas, utilization of forage and interference with recovery of areas burned by wildfires.

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. Areas both inside and outside of the Herd Management Area boundaries would continue to see locally heavy levels of utilization associated with wild horse use and areas of heavy use would continue to expand as wild horse populations continue to grow.

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

A. No. The BLM carries out removal of wild horses from public rangelands to ensure rangeland health and in accordance with land-use plans that were developed in an open, public process.

These land-use plans are how 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-administered lands has declined by nearly 50-percent since the 1940s; actual livestock grazing (as distinguished from authorized) on public rangelands has declined by 30-percent since 1971.

Q. Is there any livestock grazing in this area?

A. Yes, there are numerous grazing allotments within the HMAs that comprise the Roberts Mountain Complex and more allotments included outside the HMA boundaries where wild horses exist. Details of "Actual Use vs. Allotted" is explained below by HMA.

The livestock grazing and other details are included in the Roberts Mountain Complex Gather Environmental Assessment DOI-BLM-NV-B010-2022-0019-EA Roberts Mountain Complex Wild Horse Gather Plan Environmental Assessment located here: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2020326/570>.

Roberts Mountain HMA

The permitted livestock use was allocated in the 1994 FMUDs for the Roberts Mountain and Three Bars Allotments. This allocation was based on carrying capacity analysis completed through the Roberts Mountain and Three Bars Allotment Evaluations completed in 1994. Through the FMUD and subsequent settlement agreements, livestock active preference was reduced by 20% and 27% for the Three Bars and Roberts Mountain Allotments respectively. Additionally, grazing systems were implemented, and recommendations and terms and conditions identified to protect important wildlife habitat.

Total billed AUMs the Roberts Mountain Allotment between 2017-2021 has ranged from 63-76% of the permitted use and averaged 70% through this period. Three Bars billed AUMs ranged from 53-70% during this period and averaged 63.6% of permitted use. Both the Three Bars and Roberts Mountain Allotments are comprised of many pastures. As indicated in the above table, the portion of the allotments within the HMA are 38 and 46%, for the Roberts Mountain and Three Bars allotment, respectively. Therefore, the portions of billed AUMs that are grazed within the HMA are less than the allotment totals.

Rangeland Health Evaluations (RHAs) have not been completed to assess Standards for Rangeland Health for either of these grazing allotments. RHAs will be completed within both allotments in future years. At that time, the Standards for Rangeland Health would be assessed and changes to the livestock management system implemented if deemed necessary.

Throughout the Roberts Mountain HMA, livestock and wild horses can and do utilize the same habitat and have dietary overlap (SIR Chapter 8.0). Wild horses tend to travel farther from water and may use some higher elevations than cattle in the summer months. Livestock, however, can be controlled by herding, and using wells or temporary water hauls operated by the permittees. Due to the limited water availability and other management considerations, the Coils and Nichols Pastures within the Kobeh Valley portion of the Roberts Mountain HMA have not been utilized extensively by livestock and have consistently been utilized to a greater degree by wild horses than by livestock.

Fish Creek and Whistler Mountain HMAs

A comprehensive Rangeland Health Assessment was completed in 2004 for the Fish Creek Complex, which includes the Lucky C and Romano Allotments, in addition to others south of U.S. Highway 50 associated with the remaining portion of the Fish Creek HMA. The analysis of the data resulted in adjustments to livestock use and establishment of AMLs for wild horses within the Fish Creek and Whistler Mountain HMAs. As a result, livestock management systems were implemented for all of the allotments, which included changes in season of use and changes to permitted use.

Carrying capacity analysis was completed for all allotments within the Fish Creek Complex, using utilization data and actual use for wild horses and livestock. Through the FMUD issued in September 2004, the permitted livestock use for the Lucky C Allotment was reduced by 40%, to 3,054 AUMs and management system developed to avoid use during the critical growth periods.

Through the FMUD, the Romano Allotment active preference received an increase of 825 AUMs that had been placed into voluntary non-use in the 1990's through a transfer. The historic preference for the allotment was 5,079 AUMs. The 2004 FMUD, established the permitted use at 2,887 AUMs.

Total billed AUMs for the Lucky C Allotment for the past 5 years (2017-2021) have been 100% of the permitted AUMs. For the same time-period, the total billed AUMs for the Romano allotment have been on average 75% of the total permitted AUMs.

Within these allotments, wild horse and livestock use can exhibit 100% overlap. As with the Roberts Mountain and Three Bars Allotments, livestock use can be controlled using wells and other water sources. Wild horses utilize the allotments in relation to climate, forage quality and water needs through the year.

A substantial proportion of the wild horse population associated with the RMC exists outside of HMA boundaries where wild horse management has not been designated. Excess wild horses in these areas have a direct impact to resource availability and rangeland health. The grazing allotments are located outside of the RMC boundaries in which wild horses have been documented since 2008. The average percentage of billed AUMs compared to permitted AUMs for the past 5 years have been 76, 89, 65, and 31% for the JD, Santa Fe Ferguson, Willow Ranch, and Dry Creek Allotments, respectively.

Other grazing allotments are included in the project area outside of Herd Management Areas as wild horses exist in these areas where use for them has not been allocated. These allotments include JD Ranch, Santa Fe Ferguson, Dry Creek, and Willow Ranch.

Q. Where can I learn more about the Roberts Mountain Complex?

A. The Roberts Mountain Complex Environmental Assessment and Supplemental Information Report can be found at this link: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2020326/570>.

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

A. Please visit the BLM's website at <https://www.blm.gov/whb>