



FY2024 North Lander Wild Horse Complex Questions and Answers

Why is the North Lander Complex gather necessary, and why remove so many?

With few natural predators that can control population growth, wild horse herds typically grow 20 percent per year, doubling in size every four to five years if not managed. Chronic wild horse overpopulation in fragile ecosystems endangers overall land health with the possibility of permanent, irrecoverable damage to important resources and impacts to other wildlife populations. The North Lander Complex area is almost entirely composed of Greater Sage-grouse priority habitat and much of the area is categorized as winter/yearlong or crucial mule deer and pronghorn range.

The gather is being conducted to prevent further deterioration of land health due to wild horse overpopulation in the Complex. The gather is also necessary to remove animals from private lands and areas not designated for their long-term use.

Based on recent aerial infrared surveys, we estimate the Complex's population is approximately 3,035, while the appropriate management level (AML) is 320–536 horses. In accordance with the 10-year management plan, it will be necessary to remove approximately 2,715 horses to return the Complex to its low AML.

Current populations are almost six times the high appropriate management level for the Complex. Our populations are not in balance and impacts are clearly evident at this time. Failure to manage these horses at an appropriate level will lead to their starvation and death as well as the starvation of other rangeland users including sage-grouse.

The BLM is required by law to manage and protect wild horses and burros under the authority of the [Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971](#).

How can you ensure genetic diversity when you're removing horses to the *low* AML?

The BLM monitors genetic diversity in its wild horse herds by collecting samples of hair follicles for analysis. We manage for the meta-population of wild horses (a group of populations that are separated by space but consist of the same species). If necessary, we'll introduce genetics from outside the complex but within the Wyoming meta-population to ensure genetic diversity. The adaptive management plan outlines plans to infuse new genetics into each of the HMAs within the complex in conjunction with future gathers.

Why are you conducting this gather so close to foaling season? Won't foals be in danger?

Peak foaling season of wild horses on public lands occurs in late April and early May. The great majority of foaling happens March through June. As a precaution, unless there is an approved

emergency situation, the BLM does not use helicopters to gather wild horses from March through June. The BLM and its contractors strive to conduct every helicopter-assisted gather as carefully as possible, especially when foals are present.

Though foals typically grow rapidly and within days are capable of maintaining speed with their mother, the [BLM's Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program](#) includes provisions to protect the welfare of foals that are part of gather operations. For example, the rate of movement and herding distance the pilot uses are based on the weakest or smallest animal in the group (i.e., foals or pregnant mares). Other provisions include re-uniting dependent foals that become separated from their mare and ensuring foals are protected from larger stallions while in a holding corral or during transport.

Additionally, temperature and other factors are closely monitored and reviewed throughout the day to ensure animal safety. If temperatures exceed what is healthy and safe for the animals, the BLM will pause gather operations.

How is gelding up to 95% of stallions and treating up to 100% of mares with GonaCon not eliminating the Complex's diversity?

The environmental assessment outlines an adaptive management plan with a goal of reducing (not eliminating) reproduction to a balanced sustainable level. In relation to this adaptive management, the EA stipulates that the lowest level of management capable of achieving this goal will be employed. The words "up to" are extremely relevant. Secondly, those percentages (should they be employed to the full extent) relate only to captured animals. Typical gather efficiency is less than 80%. There will be a significant percentage of the total population that is neither captured nor treated. Lastly, GonaCon is not 100% effective and the degree to which it is effective generally decreases over time. Thus, treating mares with GonaCon does not necessarily prevent them from contributing to the population's genetics in the future.

What will happen to the wild horses removed from public lands?

Gathered horses selected for removal will be transported to the Wheatland Off-Range Corral where they will be checked by a veterinarian, prepared for adoption, and then offered for adoption through the BLM's wild horse and burro adoption program. Some will be sent to the Wyoming Honor Farm and the Mantle Ranch Wild Horse Training Facility for gentling prior to adoption.

Why doesn't the BLM reduce livestock grazing instead of gathering wild horses?

Reducing grazing to shift forage use to wild horses would not be in conformance with the Lander Resource Management Plan and is contrary to the BLM's multiple-use mission. It was Congress' intent to manage wild horses as one of the many uses of the public lands, not the single use. Therefore, the BLM is required to manage wild horses on healthy and productive public lands, in balance with wildlife, domestic livestock, vegetation and other uses.

Additionally, livestock are managed by grazing permits. They can be confined to specific pastures and limited to specific periods/seasons of use to minimize impacts to public lands. Conversely, wild horses are present year-round, and their impacts to rangeland resources cannot be controlled through establishment of a grazing system. Thus, impacts from wild horses can only be addressed by limiting their numbers to a level that does not adversely impact rangeland resources and other multiple uses.

Returning the population of wild horses to within the herd's AML is expected to help improve rangeland conditions, providing positive impacts to the vegetation which would benefit both livestock and wild horse grazing. The analysis and decision for this 10-year plan did not make any adjustments to permitted livestock use following the gather (in other words, removed horses will not be replaced by livestock). Changes in the amount of forage allocated for livestock use are made through land use planning decisions.

Will the BLM implement population control measures during this gather?

During this first gather of the 10-year plan, most horses caught will need to be removed in order to return the population to within its AML. Subsequent gathers over the 10-year period will focus on removing young, highly adoptable animals and administering population control measures for older and less adoptable animals and returning them to the range.

In order to successfully implement any population control method, a high percentage of the population must be treated. During this initial gather, if we're able to capture 91% of the population, we'll only be able to treat and release about 40 horses to reach the low appropriate management level at the conclusion of the gather.

If and when population control measures are implemented, what could they include?

Population control methods that we analyzed and are part of the plan include

- gelding or vasectomizing stallions that are returned to the range;
- reducing the reproducing population through an adjusted sex ratio of 60:40, males:females;
- using flexible intrauterine devices (IUDs) on non-pregnant mares that are returned to the range;
- and using the fertility control vaccine GonaCon-Equine on all mares that are returned to the range, including mares receiving an IUD.

As part of a sustained fertility control program, humane sterilization could be a cost-effective way to slow population growth and reduce the need for gathers and animal handling in the long run. Sterilizing some wild horses in herds where it's not practical to use short-term fertility control vaccines and IUDs is supported by the American Association of Equine Practitioners and American Veterinary Medical Association – two of the largest equine veterinarian associations in the world.

Is GonaCon-Equine safe to use on wild horses as a fertility control vaccine?

GonaCon-Equine is a safe vaccine that is registered with the EPA and approved for use in wild horses. Capitalizing on the agency's successful research and development efforts, the BLM has been increasing its use of GonaCon-Equine to manage population growth. It's now used in over 15 HMAs throughout the west. One dose of GonaCon can cause moderate effects that may last two years, but a second dose can prevent pregnancy for 4-5 years.

Did the BLM hold it's annual required public hearing about the use of helicopters during gathers?

Yes, the national public hearing regarding the use of motorized vehicles (including helicopters) within the HMAs was held on May 23, 2024, and covered all HMAs for the year.

But aren't helicopter gathers inhumane?

The BLM's helicopter gathers have been proven to be more humane, effective and efficient than other types of gather methods when large numbers of animals need to be removed over large areas or rugged terrain. Injuries to wild horses and burros during gathers are rare. The vast majority (99%+) of wild horses and burros are gathered without severe incident or injury that causes death. In FY2023, out of 5,759 animals gathered, less than one third of one percent (0.31%, or 18 animals) were lost due to an injury that occurred at the gather event.

A [recent study published in the Journal of Equine Veterinary Science](#) found that BLM's wild horse and burro gathers are considered much safer than similar gather operations (usually for scientific research projects) of elk, deer and caribou.

Read the [Top 5 Things to Know about Wild Horse and Burro Gathers](#).

How does the BLM determine if a potential adopter is on the "up and up" and the adopted animal is not destined for a slaughterhouse in Canada or Mexico?

The BLM has a robust adoption process to ensure animals go to good homes. The BLM screens potential adopters alongside a list of individuals that have been determined to be ineligible. All animals adopted from BLM are subject to inspection by BLM specialists prior to being titled. This is to ensure that the adopter is complying with all requirements of their Private Maintenance and Care Agreement (PMACA) relating to animal welfare/wellbeing. Where deficiencies are found, BLM works with the adopter to correct them. If compliance is not or cannot be attained, the adopter will either voluntarily relinquish the animal back to BLM or BLM will repossess the animal.

In the latter case, if a determination is made that an adopter violated any of the Prohibited Acts outlined in their PMACA, the agency may issue a Decision Letter that would render them ineligible to participate in the adoption program in the future. Certain violations – such as selling/transferring animals prior to receiving title – may also be referred to BLM Law

Enforcement for investigation and, from there, potentially to the appropriate U.S. Attorney who may exercise discretion whether or not to prosecute.

More information about the requirements for adopting can be found at [Adoption Program | Bureau of Land Management \(blm.gov\)](#).