



BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program On-Range Branch Highlights

National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board Meeting | Jan. 7-9, 2025

The Wild Horse and Burro Program On-Range Branch is primarily responsible for coordinating management of wild horses and burros on BLM public lands, including advising the division chief on on-range management matters, developing and maintaining the annual gather and survey schedules, supporting communication efforts at HQ and in the field, coordinating transport of animals, managing gather contracts and directing research efforts.

Gathers/Removals: In Fiscal Year 2024, BLM gathered 17,200 animals, and of those removed a total of 16,100 wild horses and burros from overpopulated herds across the West as part of its efforts to achieve and maintain appropriate management levels. Of the 40 gather operations conducted, 12 were emergency and nuisance gathers removing 1,200 animals. There was close to 500 loads from the gathers that were sent to facilities, 93 loads went to adoption events, and approximately 200 loads were transferred between facilities.

The BLM has identified approximately 10,700 wild horses and burros for removal in Fiscal Year 2025 focused on continuing recent efforts to reduce overpopulation in large herd management areas and herd areas, including the Triple B and Kiger HMAs, as well as Adobe Town/Salt Wells Creek herd management areas and herd areas.

The BLM continues to prioritize animal welfare in all aspects of management, including during gather operations. During Fiscal Year 2024, the BLM conducted seven internal assessments of gather operations to gauge compliance with standards outlined in the Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program. These assessments showed an average score of 95% compliant. Three gathers in FY2024 primarily focused on capturing animals, treating them with fertility control, holding for a period of time in order to apply a booster, and releasing them back to the range.

Fertility Control: Along with use of the PZP vaccines (ZonaStat-H, and PZP-22), the BLM has increased its use of the GonaCon-Equine vaccine since 2018. These vaccines are generally expected to have contraceptive effects that decrease over time, as the immune response gradually declines. Peer-reviewed results show that GonaCon-Equine can cause 4 or more years of infertility in mares that later receive a booster dose of GonaCon-Equine and suggest that the duration of effect may be shorter for mares that are darted than mares where a booster dose is hand-injected several years after the primer dose. This is longer than the expected infertility for PZP ZonaStat-H or PZP-22 treated mares that receive a booster dose of PZP vaccine. Monitoring data from wild mares that were boosted ~30 days after the primer dose indicates that about 85% of mares were contracepted for a year and about 70% were contracepted for two years.

BLM continues to move toward having a full time Fertility Control Coordinator in 2025. This position will coordinate and work with BLM field specialists to increase fertility control strategies in HMAs. Other duties would include vaccine orders, equipment recommendations, reporting, national record keeping, and training for the field. The position was advertised in the fall and human resource actions are ongoing.

Population Inventories: Population estimates from reliable aerial surveys and ground counts are essential for herd monitoring and management decisions. The BLM aims to conduct reliable surveys of about 1/3 of the HMAs every year, on a rotating basis. In FY2024, the BLM used the statistically validated 'simultaneous double-observer' method of data recording in aerial surveys in 69 of the 175 herd management areas (HMAs) and 18 herd areas (HAs). Finally, in FY2024 there were also 5 ground-based surveys in HMAs where almost all the horses are individually catalogued and identifiable; in most of those HMAs, BLM works with and relies on help from volunteer groups to obtain those annual counts. e

Research: After a public webinar explaining application process requirements, the BLM solicited research proposals in October 2023, via notice of funding opportunity L24AS00091 and an associated request for proposals to federal research agencies. The BLM sought proposals that addressed priorities from the [BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program 2021 Strategic Research Plan](#): 1) develop and/ or test fertility control methods that are safe, humane, and applicable to female wild horse (mares); 2) address ecological relationships between wild horses and burro and their environments, with studies that may also address the effects of climate change on wild horse and burro populations; or 3) studies that would further improve wild horse and burro aerial censuses; develop new insights into wild horse and burro genetics; improve health, handling, and welfare; identify factors that improve horse and burro adoption rates; or address human dimensions of wild horse and burro management. The merit review process for qualified applications included external expert peer review and internal agency review. Six proposals were awarded for funding, and these are noted in the table below with 'FY2024.' That includes three fertility control research projects, two projects related to interactions between wild horses and the environment, and one project related to wild horse and burro genetics.

A summary of wild horse and burro-related research projects that are either funded by or permitted by the BLM is provided in December 2024 Research Update, which also includes a list of publications that directly or closely relate to BLM-managed wild horses and burros, and were published since (roughly) the last Advisory Board meeting.