
APPENDIX 12—MANAGING WILD HORSE POPULATIONS IN THE RAWLINS RMPPA

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) monitors wild horse populations to comply with population management objectives set in the land use plan. Monitoring of the habitat and the wild horses has been ongoing within the herd management areas (HMA) for several years.

Monitoring has included some of the following methods and approaches:

- Precipitation data
- Rangeland trends (primarily on uplands)
- Forage utilization data
- Licensed use by livestock grazing allotment
- Wildlife actual use and forage requirements
- Wild horse population data, including but not limited to—
 - Population counts
 - Reproductive rates
 - Age/sex structure
 - Actual use sightings
 - Determination of areas of highest horse use, or concentration areas.

Should an evaluation of monitoring data indicate that wild horse management objectives in the land use plan were not being met, population adjustments in land use plans and Herd Management Area Plans (HMAP) could be necessary. Population adjustments would be analyzed prior to initiating maintenance actions in applicable HMAPs and Resource Management Plans (RMP). Monitoring and adjusting the appropriate management level (AML), as necessary, would ensure that a thriving natural ecological balance is maintained.

More information on specific management techniques used in managing wild horse populations and the nature of such horses can be found in the *Rawlins Field Office Wild Horse Management Handbook*. This document is an assemblage of all relevant policy and technical guidance that must be considered in developing and implementing wild horse management plans and actions. The handbook is available for review at the BLM Rawlins Field Office, 1300 North 3rd Street, Rawlins, Wyoming.

ESTABLISHMENT AND MODIFICATION OF HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS AND APPROPRIATE MANAGEMENT LEVELS

The current AMLs were established in 1994 from a process that included 5 years of focused, intensive monitoring; evaluation of data; public input; and environmental analysis. Since that time, the land use plan maintenance process has resulted in some boundary adjustments and realignments to the HMAs.

AML/Population Expression in the Rawlins Field Office

The existing AMLs in the Rawlins Field Office (RFO) are expressed as the number of adults and yearlings, not including unweaned colts of the year. This definition was included in the 1994 AML evaluation and decision. At the time of the development of these numbers, customary primary inventory times were in the late winter or very early in the calendar year (typically February or March). The colts of the previous year had either perished or survived to approach their first birthday, and the colts of the year

had not yet been born; therefore, the number counted represented the adult population for the following year.

Lately, there has been a shift in inventory times to favor the month of July. When a herd is counted at this time, most of the colts of the year have been born, and many are 2 months of age or older. Thus, an inventory of the same herd in the same calendar year will yield a higher number, barring some atypical late-winter event that results in unusually high mortality.

Inventory practices are under review pursuant to the Consent Decree with the State of Wyoming. Inventory practices may be standardized, and any such standardization could well include a uniform method of expressing objective and existing populations. Increased interest in the genetic character of a particular herd has caused some differing views on the expression of population sizes and objectives. Geneticists usually define a population in terms of the effective population (N^E), which consists of the number of competent breeding age animals. Therefore, colts of the year, yearlings, a portion of the 2-year olds, and the very old will not be included as part of the effective population count. The AML necessary to maintain an effective breeding population of 100 would be about 165 adult animals, not including unweaned colts. The exact number would vary depending on the age and sex distribution of the particular herd.

To change the AMLs and the upper and lower limits associated with them to a format that would reflect the above-discussed competent breeding age approach would require adjustments in AML for the Resource Management Plan Planning Area (RMPPA). Table A12-1 shows the relationship between AML numbers and post-foaling populations of wild horses.

Table A12-1. Relationship Between AML and Wild Horse Populations

HMA	Population Pre-Foaling ¹			Population Post-Foaling ²		
	AML	Upper Limit	Lower Limit	At AML ²	At Upper Limit	At Lower Limit
Adobe Town	700	812	588	812	942	682
Stewart Creek	150	177	123	177	209	145
Lost Creek	70	83	57	83	98	68

¹ This number includes adult horses and yearlings, but not unweaned colts. This is the definition of AML included in the 1994 AML evaluation and decision. This definition of AML is conducive to wild horse inventories completed in late winter (February/March), because much of the winter mortality would have already occurred.

² This number represents the total wild horse population being managed at AML following foaling. Because unweaned colts are not considered in the AML, the total wild horse population may be higher than the AML, although the population is still considered as meeting the AML. This number is conducive to wild horse inventories completed in late summer (July/August), because many mares would have foaled, but some of the foals may not survive the upcoming seasons.

Population post-foaling, shown in Table A12-1, represents the total population, including all age classes, and represents the approximate population as of October 1 of a given year. To change the definition of the AML would be an implementation decision and, therefore, appealable.

IMPLICATIONS OF WILD HORSE GENETIC RESEARCH

Wild horses managed on the public lands have various histories and originate from a variety of backgrounds. The genetic roots of most of the horses are predominantly American, and some have beginnings as recent as following World War II. Advances in genetic research have enabled the BLM to

identify the specific genetic stock from which a wild horse population originates, which assists in identifying the history of a population. There have been occasional encounters with populations whose genetic roots have been traced to the Spanish exploration period by identifying genotypes associated with the New World Iberian (Spanish Colonial) breeds. Populations with this genetic similarity provide a genetic resource that the majority of wild horses on public lands do not. The wild horses in the Rawlins RMPPA Lost Creek HMA are such a population.

In 2001, blood samples from wild horses removed from the Lost Creek HMA were provided to Dr. E. Gus Cothran of the Equine Parentage Testing and Research Laboratory at the University of Kentucky. Results from the genetic analysis of these samples identified a clear contribution from New World Iberian breeds. The highest average genetic association of the provided blood samples was with these Spanish Colonial breeds. The next highest average genetic association was with North American Gaited breeds, most likely from the routine escape of domestic saddle stock from the surrounding areas. A full report of the results of this genetic analysis can be obtained from the RFO.

As genetic research continues with the wild horse populations throughout the Red Desert metapopulation, the necessity of maintaining the population of wild horses in the Lost Creek HMA in genetic isolation may vary. If populations adjacent to the Lost Creek HMA share the prevalence of New World Iberian genomes, intermingling these populations would be beneficial to maintain the genetic resource. Isolating and maintaining an internally viable population in the Lost Creek HMA would not be required. However, if the New World Iberian genes are prevalent only in Lost Creek, further intermingling could cause this genetic resource to disappear. Continued monitoring and research may result in adjustments to management decisions for the Lost Creek HMA. Adjustments would be implemented following appropriate analysis and maintenance of management documents.

WILD HORSE MANAGEMENT HISTORY IN THE STATE OF WYOMING AND THE RAWLINS RMPPA

In 1971, in response to the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, Wyoming BLM identified the existing wild horse habitats and populations in the state that would likely be subject to the provisions of the Act. These identifications were made using the best information and understanding available at the time and resulted in 30 areas with populations totaling 4,411 horses. Of those, 1,049 were estimated to be privately owned horses that would be claimed and removed from the range under the provisions of the Act. Those 30 areas consisted of a total of 6,557,160 acres of public lands, 389,112 acres of land owned by the State of Wyoming, and 2,479,096 acres of privately owned lands. The 30 areas varied greatly in size and land ownership.

As soon as the Act passed, a number of activities that had served to limit growth in the number of horses and the expansion of their ranges ceased. Horse populations in Wyoming began to grow.

Almost immediately, BLM personnel began to accumulate additional information about the horses and their habitats. Area boundaries were refined as more was learned about the seasonal needs and habits of horses. By 1974, the list of 30 areas had increased to 40 areas, and they consisted of a total of 6,820,749 acres of public lands, 406,103 acres of land owned by the State of Wyoming, and 2,355,852 acres of privately owned lands. As before, the 40 areas varied greatly in size and land ownership.

The period of 1976 to 1984 saw a great deal of activity in land use planning. For Wyoming, this can be called the Management Framework Plan (MFP) era. During this period, the 40 areas previously identified were combined into 24 areas. The MFP process resulted in identifying 14 of those 24 areas that in one way or another failed to meet suitability for maintaining a long-term healthy population of horses in

accordance with the intent of the Act. One of the two most prevalent criteria was that the area contained significant amounts of private land. The other was that the horse population was too small to continue to thrive when isolated from customary sources of new genetic stock. The remaining 10 areas were designated as HMAs. The HMAs consisted of 3,322,776 public acres, 152,551 acres of land owned by the State of Wyoming, and 861,022 acres of privately owned land. This process also identified population objectives for these herds, totaling 2,673 horses.

Land use plans and the decisions that they generate are dynamic, adjusting in response to changing environmental conditions or new information. With respect to horses in Wyoming, this has resulted in the 16 HMAs currently recognized in Wyoming. These 16 areas consist of 3,664,002 acres of public land, 154,737 acres of land owned by the State of Wyoming, and 846,243 acres of privately owned lands. The 16 areas still vary in size and land ownership, although not to the extent that they once did. Particularly worthy of note is the significant amount of private land now included within designated HMAs. Much of the private acreage consists of land owned or controlled by the Rock Springs Grazing Association of southwestern Wyoming. It has made its lands available to an agreed-on number of wild horses since 1979. Without access to those lands, approximately 1.5 million acres of adjoining and commingled public lands would be unavailable for inclusion in HMAs. This would, in effect, eliminate one-third of the free-roaming horses in Wyoming. The current, combined population objective (AML) for wild, free-roaming horses in Wyoming is 3,263, which is 18 percent more than it was in 1980. Without the access to the private lands noted above, the combined AML would be only 2,038.

As noted above, an effective breeding population of 100 horses is necessary for maintaining a genetically viable herd of wild horses. In Wyoming, 9 of the 16 HMAs do not have AMLs that would indicate genetically stable long-term populations. However, wild horse herds in these HMAs are usually part of a larger metapopulation in adjacent HMAs. The metapopulation is the entire gene pool available to a specific herd.

When originally identified and reviewed through planning, HMA boundaries were designated to reflect common herd location, as well as to simplify administration and management of wild horses. As a result, several HMAs may be designated as adjacent to one another in different BLM field offices or simply separated by geographic features such as watersheds. The individual populations in each HMA may be separated for most of the year, but both may share the same winter range. Sharing resources enables regular interaction between the two populations. Interaction allows horses from each herd to be recruited by and assimilated into the other. Although the AML of the individual HMAs would appear to be genetically deficient, each population is periodically infused with new genetic material and the genetic diversity of both herds is enhanced. In any given year, only a very few bands from each herd may actually exchange members. However, over time, the normal behaviors of each herd cause the mixing to become widespread.

From the standpoint of genetic viability, the required level of exchange of animals and the related introduction of new genetic material is not high. In small populations of less than 150 animals, the introduction of one or two competent breeding animals per generation (i.e., about 10 years) will ensure the maintenance of the genetic resource. To be members of a metapopulation, individual animals need not experience frequent, large-scale contact with one another.

Table A12-2 identifies the Rawlins RMPPA wild horse HMAs, and the metapopulations in which the horses of the HMAs interact.

Table A12-2. Wild Horse Regional Metapopulations Associated With the Rawlins RMPPA

Rawlins RMPPA HMAs		Metapopulation		HMA(s) in the Metapopulation	Type of Interaction	Points of Contact
Name	AML	Name	AML			
Adobe Town	700	Stateline	1,250	Adobe Town Salt Wells Sand Wash (Co) ¹	Male migration, female exchange	Haystacks Alkali Sand Creek Powder Wash
Stewart Creek	150	Red Desert ²	790	Stewart Creek Lost Creek Antelope Hills Divide Basin	Male migration, female exchange	Hay Reservoir Bare Ring Hadsell Osborne Draw
Lost Creek	70	Red Desert ²	790	Stewart Creek Lost Creek Antelope Hills Divide Basin	Male migration, female exchange	Hay Reservoir Bare Ring Hadsell Osborne Draw

¹ Sand Wash HMA is located entirely in Colorado within the BLM's Craig Field Office. Although managed by Colorado BLM, horses from the Sand Wash HMA provide biologically and genetically important interactions with horses from the other HMAs in the metapopulation.

² Wild horses from the Sweetwater metapopulation (Green Mountain HMA and Crooks Mountain HMA) occasionally mix with wild horses in the Red Desert metapopulation.

In the 30 years since the Act was passed, the following has occurred in the State of Wyoming:

- The average herd size has increased from 147 to 197.
- The area of public land available for use by horses has increased slightly since 1980.
- The area of private land occupied has decreased from 2.5 million to 846,243 acres.
- The area of private land available for legal use has increased from 0 to 846,243 acres.
- Of the 16 herds, 14 are parts of metapopulations greater than 300.

The same trends that are described for the State of Wyoming also occurred in the RMPPA. In 1971, an estimated 435 horses subject to management under the Act occupied 2,116,095 acres in six areas. Today, an estimated 1,540 horses subject to management under the Act occupy approximately 929,000 acres in three areas.

It should be noted that the BLM has routinely removed excess and stray horses from the range since 1978. During that period, more than 27,000 horses have been removed from Wyoming rangelands and placed through the BLM's Adopt-a-Horse-or-Burro program; yet the population still exceeds 6,000 animals. This is an important indicator that BLM's management of the horses does not imperil the cornerstone principle of the Act—a thriving ecological balance.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT ACTIONS IN THE RMPPA

It should be noted that population management actions in the RMPPA take place as part of a state and national undertaking. Scarce resources and space are allocated so that horses can be removed from public rangelands, so that effective planning and scheduling can take place bureau-wide. No single office controls the fiscal and logistical resources necessary to effect the desired management of horses in its jurisdiction. Instead, each office is part of the BLM-wide wild horse management program. A key part of this program is to identify a gather cycle for a state. Once established, the gather cycle needs to be

adhered to even when it results in gathers taking place in less than ideal conditions within a particular HMA.

AMLs are established to allow a range of fluctuation in the population, while still meeting the criteria for a valid AML. In evaluating the AML, a lower limit is identified and then examined to ensure that the particular herd will remain genetically viable if it is periodically reduced to that level. This is a crucial consideration for many of the smaller herds in the state. Concurrently, an upper limit is identified and evaluated to determine whether resource damage or other significant conflicts would occur under normal climatic conditions if the population were allowed to increase to this level cyclically. The AML will equate to the average population level during a management cycle. AMLs in the RFO do not include the unweaned colts of the year.

Various gather cycles are being analyzed (outside the scope of this RMP) as part of the statewide wild horse management strategy. State gather cycles of 3 and 4 years are being evaluated and compared. Cycles longer than 4 years are also being evaluated as part of a management scheme that would employ fertility control to limit population increases.

As of August 2004, the determination of which gather cycle will be employed in Wyoming is still tentative and awaits further evaluation. When a gather cycle is chosen for implementation in the state, part of the evaluation leading to the choice will be Wyoming BLM's ability to remain in substantial conformance with the consent decree of August 28, 2003, and all other relevant law and policy. The upper and lower limits will be reevaluated and adjusted to ensure that maintenance of a thriving ecological balance. Because the AMLs were evaluated considering the potential for adverse effects from a 4-year gather cycle and the associated level of population fluctuation, a shorter cycle and lower average population levels will still serve the purposes of the AML determination process.

Inventory Practices in the RMPPA

Inventory practices in the RMPPA have developed over time and have incorporated a myriad of experiences. At present, common to all inventory in the RFO, a fixed-wing aircraft is used. North-south transects at 1-minute intervals are employed, flight height is about 500 feet above ground level (AGL), and airspeed is about 120–150 miles per hour (mph). These practices have been developed to minimize stress to horses and other animals and to comply with BLM aircraft safety guidelines. Some inventories are completed as part of a research project involving the United States Geological Survey (USGS) Biological Resources Discipline (BRD) from Fort Collins, Colorado. These inventories employ three observers, including one representing the Wyoming Department of Agriculture. This approach yields an actual, independent double count of one half of the area, and a constructed double count of the other half. The results are analyzed statistically and evaluated. Other inventories typically employ a single observer.

Animal Health

Animal health issues are considered at two levels: horses removed from the range and maintained in BLM facilities, and horses remaining on the range. Both levels are afforded appropriate attention through the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that BLM has with the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). This MOU provides BLM with access to a complete staff of federal veterinarians in each state, and to a national program manager located in Fort Collins, Colorado, who can access the Veterinary Services (VS) Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health, VS Western Regional hub, and U.S. Department of the Interior's Biological Resources Division of USGS. APHIS, therefore, will be able to incorporate the wild, free-roaming horses managed by BLM into its responsibility, which is to ensure the health and safety of the nation's plants and animals. A complete

copy of the MOU is available at http://web.blm.gov/internal/wo-500/directives/mou/BLM_MOU_WO_260-2006-02.pdf.

At both levels, the staff of APHIS is involved with the State of Wyoming, private practitioners, and other federal agencies to ensure the appropriateness of all activities involving wild, free-roaming horses managed by BLM.

THE WILD, FREE-ROAMING NATURE (OF WILD HORSES)

There are approximately 30,000 wild horses in North America and approximately 2,000,000 domestic horses in the same area. How are they different? What might change in response to other resource uses? In the Rawlins RMP, the term “wild, free-roaming nature” is used to denote the difference.

Currently, horses in all of the HMAs exhibit a wild, free-roaming nature. They are wary of humans, but do not exhibit extreme fear of them. The horses rely on their acute senses, especially sight, to maintain a feeling of safety. They use their speed and agility to quickly retreat to a “safe” distance when they are infringed upon. They do not recognize or seek any dependence on humans for sustenance. They are, above all, horses with choices. They can choose their space, diet, company, and next move. They can choose the behavior that serves their urge to thrive in the best way. On the other hand, their domesticated cousins have only limited choices and are usually comfortably dependent on humans for sustenance.

The loss of a wild horse’s wild, free-roaming nature is not fatal, but it does have consequences. A certain kind and amount of space is required to sustain a wild, free-roaming nature, both of which are satisfied by what is currently available to the horses within the HMAs. Changes introduced to either the kind or amount of space available will cause the horses to make different choices, and the choices become more varied as more change occurs. Change comes in a variety of forms, and most are a function of or accompanied by increased human presence. New roads, structures, facilities, and fences are examples.

The consequences of these changes are that wild horses no longer act as wild until finally, they do not act wild at all. They seek out the most convenient foraging areas, and thus become more competitive with domestic livestock. Band structure and function may cease to provide a secure environment in which youngsters can mature and learn successful behavior. A smaller percentage of the population may have the opportunity to successfully reproduce. Self-reliance for sustenance is replaced by dependence, which in turn is replaced by need. Changes in environment can eventually transform a population of magnificent wild animals into feral pests.

