

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Wassuk Herd Management Area Wild Horse Gather Plan

Finding of No Significant Impact

DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2011-0061-EA

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
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It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

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Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Carson City District, Stillwater Field Office is proposing to gather approximately 500 wild horses from the Wassuk Herd Management Area (HMA), and remove 250 of them from the range. This gather would occur on BLM lands within the Wassuk HMA and adjacent public range lands in Mineral and Lyon Counties, Nevada.

The Wassuk HMA is situated within the administrative jurisdiction of the BLM Carson City District. The HMA is approximately 12 miles east-southeast of Yerington, Nevada (NV) and west of Walker Lake, NV. The Proposed Action evaluated under EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2012-0061-EA (Chapter 2 of the EA) for the Wassuk HMA is scheduled to begin in or about November 2012. Should existing holding space and budgetary limitations as well as higher priority gathers need to occur due to drought emergencies or fires, the BLM may postpone this gather to the summer of 2013 or later. The initial gather would entail gathering approximately 80% of the existing population, which would be roughly 500 wild horses from the Wassuk HMA and those outside of the HMA boundaries. Approximately 250 of these horses would be removed and 250 would be returned back to the range following the gather. Of these, about 100 mares would be vaccinated with PZP-22 (Porcine Zona Pellucida) fertility control vaccine which would assist with slowing population growth, maintaining population size within the AMLs and extend the time before another gather to remove excess wild horses would be needed in the Wassuk HMA.

The AML for this HMA is a range of 110-165 wild horses, as determined through a FMUD signed in 1997 which allocated forage to wildlife, wild horses, and livestock. The goal of the Proposed Action is to gather wild horses to obtain the low AML, however due to space limitations at existing holding facilities, only 250 will be gathered during this initial gather. Additional gathers would be needed to achieve/maintain AML, and fully implement population growth rate controls.

The BLM intends to continue with population control activities to gather to the low end of AML for the Wassuk HMA over the next 10 years by returning every 2-3 years to treat or re-treat mares with fertility control vaccine as well as to remove excess wild horses as specified in this EA. Due to existing holding space and budgetary limitations, the BLM would not be able to meet the necessary removal targets to achieve the low range of AML with the initial gather so follow-up gathers would be required to successfully achieve AML and fully implement the population control efforts. The Proposed Action includes these future removals and treatments/re-treatments of mares with PZP-22, to be conducted in the future to help attain and maintain AML. Any future gather actions in the Wassuk HMA would be conducted utilizing the same methods described in this EA.

All wild horses residing outside of established HMA boundaries will be removed regardless of sex and age and would not be relocated back to the HMA. Wild horse data including sex and age distribution, condition class information (using the Henneke rating system), color, size and other information may also be recorded. Hair samples may be collected on about 25-100 animals to assess the genetic diversity of the herds. Old, sick or lame horses unable to maintain an acceptable body condition greater than or equal to a Henneke Body Condition Score of 3 or with serious physical defects such as club feet, severe limb deformities, or sway back would be

humanely euthanized as an act of mercy. Decisions to humanely euthanize animals in field situations will be made in conformance with BLM policy (Washington Office Instruction Memorandum 2009-041).

Finding of No Significant Impacts

This finding and conclusion is based on the consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts described in the EA.

Based upon the analysis in the EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2012-0061-EA *Wassuk Herd Management Area Wild Horse Gather* it is my determination that the implementation of the Proposed Action will not have significant environmental impacts and that the Proposed Action is in conformance with the CRMP adopted in 2001. I have determined that the Proposed Action is not a major federal action, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared for the Proposed Action.

Context:

The Wassuk HMA is located approximately 12 miles east-southeast of Yerington, NV in Mineral and Lyon Counties. The HMA encompasses approximately 51,750 acres and consists of north-south trending mountain ranges surrounded by valley bottoms. The HMA is located on both public lands administered by the Carson City District and private lands and encompasses portions of four livestock grazing allotments.

The Butler Mountain Allotment is located in and around the Wassuk Mountain Range in Mineral County. It lies southeast of Yerington, NV and west of Walker Lake, NV. There is a total of 46,916 acres of public land and no private land. There are no fences crossing the allotment to create pastures.

The Black Mountain Allotment is located in Mineral County, approximately 12 miles east-southeast of Yerington, NV. The Walker River Indian Reservation forms the eastern boundary, while Reese River Canyon forms the southern boundary. It is generally mountainous with many elevations ranging from approximately 4100 to 8102 feet. There is a total of 14,618 acres of public land and no private land. There are no fences crossing the allotment to create pastures

The Gray Hills Allotment is located in Mineral County and Lyon County, NV, and is approximately 12 miles south of Yerington, NV. A portion of the west boundary is made up of the Toiyabe National Forest, and the Wassuk Mountain Range makes up the eastern side. The East Walker River runs through the west half of the allotment. The allotment consists of 100,583 acres of land administered by the BLM and 2,200 acres of private lands. Elevations range from 4,549 feet near the East Walker River to 9,191 feet at the Peak of Bald Mountain in the Wassuk Mountain Range.

The East Walker Allotment is located on the southernmost portion of the HMA within Mineral County and Lyon County, NV, and encompasses about 5% of the entire allotment.

The Proposed Action is a site-specific action located on public lands administered by the BLM Carson City District in Mineral and Lyon Counties, Nevada, which by itself does not have international, national, regional, or state-wide importance.

Intensity:

The following discussion is based on the relevant factors that should be considered in evaluating intensity as described in 40 CFR 1508.27:

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

I have determined that none of the direct, indirect or cumulative impacts associated with the Proposed Action are significant, individually or combined. The EA evaluated both beneficial and adverse impacts of the gathers and vaccination of mares with the 2 year fertility control vaccine PZP-22 prior to releasing estimated 100 mares back into the HMA. Potential impacts include injuries to wild horses from capture, prep and sorting, transfer and holding; and affects to the populations through changes in herd population dynamics, age structure or sex ratio and subsequently to the growth rates and population size over time. Other short term impacts include disturbance (within gather sites) to vegetation, noxious weeds, invasive weeds, livestock grazing, general wildlife, migratory birds, BLM designated sensitive species, human health and safety (EA Chapter 3.0).

Implementation of the Proposed Action is expected to be beneficial for wild horse health, vegetative resources, sensitive species, riparian zones, fish/wildlife habitat, migratory birds, livestock grazing, soils and watersheds. The BLM intends to continue with population control activities to gather to the low end of AML for the Wassuk HMA over the next 10 years by returning every 2-3 years to treat or re-treat mares with fertility control vaccine as well as to remove excess wild horses as specified in this EA within the Wassuk HMA areas. Due to existing holding space and budgetary limitations, the BLM would not be able to meet necessary removal targets to achieve the low range of AML with the initial gather so follow-up gathers would be required to successfully achieve AML and fully implement population control efforts. The Proposed Action includes future removals and treatments/re-treatments of mares with PZP-22, to be conducted in the future to help attain and maintain AML. All future gather actions in the Wassuk HMA would be conducted utilizing the same methods described in this EA. Over the next 5-10 years, the BLM would continue to manage wild horses within the established AML range which would help to achieve/maintain the thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship on public lands in the area.

The BLM Contracting Officer Representative (COR) and Project Inspector (PI) assigned to the gather will be responsible for ensuring contract personnel abide by the contract specifications and the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) (EA Appendix C). Ongoing monitoring for forage condition and utilization, water availability, aerial population surveys, and animal health will continue. Fertility control monitoring will be continued in accordance with the SOPs (EA Appendix D). Public Health and Safety monitoring will be conducted in accordance with the Wild Horse Gather Public Observation Protocol (EA Appendix E) and BLM IM No. 2010-164.

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The SOPs for Population-level Fertility Control Treatments (EA Appendix C), Standard Gather Operating Procedures (EA, Appendix D), Wild Horse Gather Public Observation Protocol (EA, Appendix D subheading I) and BLM IM No. 2010-164 would be used to conduct the gather and are designed to protect human health and safety, as well as the health and safety of the wild horses. In accordance with IM No. 2010-164, the public will not be permitted to enter corrals or pens or be in direct contact with the animals. The Proposed Action would have minimal affect to public health or safety.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

The BLM Interdisciplinary Team scoped the Supplemental Authorities and Resources other than Supplemental Authorities to determine if they were present and if so, whether they may be affected by the Proposed Action. These were evaluated in Chapter 3 of EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2012-0061-EA.

Based upon the results of a BLM archival review at the Carson City District and Nevada Cultural Resources Information System, five Class III cultural resource inventories have been conducted within one mile of the proposed locations (trap sites and holding corral) between 1981 and 2008. One multi-component site was identified and documented. The prehistoric component was not evaluated and the historic was evaluated as not eligible.

All of the currently proposed location(s) are within areas of previous disturbance. To prevent unnecessary or undue degradation to known or unknown historic properties, in the event that the proposed trap sites or holding corral are deemed unsuitable during the current wild horse gather, cultural resource staff would be on site to conduct a reconnaissance of new locations and confirm that no historic properties would be affected.

If unanticipated historic-era or prehistoric resources are discovered during project activities, work would cease and be reported immediately to the BLM. In the event that any location is relocated a member of the BLM cultural staff will inventory the potential site, if cultural resources are identified this site will be dismissed from consideration and an additional site will be proposed until a suitable site is found that will not impact cultural resources.

The Yerington Paiute and the Walker River Paiute Tribes were notified of the Wassuk HMA gather in June 2012. Based upon previous consultation for this area, the tribal comments and concerns have consisted of the following: avoidance of historic properties, protection of water resources and associated plants, and access to locations for the procurement of various documented resources. To date, no concerns have been identified for the current wild horse gather, however, consultation will be considered as on going until the completion of the proposed gather.

There are no Wilderness Study Areas, prime or unique farmlands, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, or Floodplains located within the vicinity of the proposed gather trap sites, or holding corrals.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The effects of the gathers are well known and understood. BLM Carson City District has conducted numerous wild horse gathers over the past 36 years. No unresolved issues have been identified following public notification of the proposed action. This is demonstrated through the effects analysis in Chapters 3 and 4 of the EA.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The analysis provided in the EA does not indicate that this action would involve any unique or unknown risks. Relevant components of the human environment which would be either affected or potentially affected by the Proposed Action and other alternatives were addressed through the affects analyzed in this EA. The effects of wild horse gathers have resulted in fairly consistent (beneficial) outcome to wild horses and to biological and cultural resources.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

Any future wild horse gather activities outside of the scope of EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2012-0061-EA would be analyzed in appropriate environmental documents following site-specific planning with public involvement. The Proposed Action does not set a precedent for future actions or other wild horse gathers other than that which is proposed and analyzed in EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2012-0061-EA.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

The Proposed Action would help to reduce the wild horse population to the established AML, reduce population growth rates, reduce competition for limited forage and water resources, and promote healthier wild horses and rangelands. Over the short and long term consistently managing wild horses within the established AML range will achieve a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship on the public lands in the area. The Proposed Action is not related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulative impacts.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

The Proposed Action has no potential to adversely affect significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. All of the currently proposed locations are within areas of previous disturbance. To prevent unnecessary or undue degradation to known or unknown historic properties, in the event that the proposed trap sites or holding corral are deemed unsuitable during the current wild horse gather, cultural resource staff would be on site to conduct a reconnaissance of new locations and confirm that no historic properties would be affected.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.*

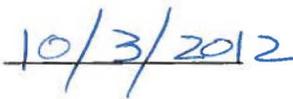
After consulting with the BLM wildlife biologist and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service website for NV, no known federally listed plant or animal species occur within the HMA.

Therefore, the Proposed Action will have no affect to any federally listed species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The Proposed Action is in compliance with the CRMP. The Proposed Action is consistent with Statutes, regulations and policies of neighboring local, County, State, Tribal governments and other Federal agencies. The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971, as amended and applicable regulations at 43 CFR § 4700. The Proposed Action does not violate or threaten to violate any Federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.


Teresa J. Knutson
Field Manager
Stillwater Field Office


Date