



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
**BUREAU OF LAND
MANAGEMENT**

Decision Record

DOI-BLM-CO-S010-2020-0009-EA

July 2020

Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) Revision

Applicant: Tres Rios Field Office, BLM

Preparing Office: Tres Rios Field Office
29211 Hwy 184
Dolores, CO 81323
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Background: The 2015 RMP directed BLM to revise and update the 1994 Spring Creek Basin HMAP. This updated analysis and plan will incorporate specific goals, objectives, and techniques for guiding the long-term management of wild horses within the HMA consistent with the resource direction contained in the new RMP.

Decision: I have decided to select **Alternative A, the Proposed Action** for implementation as described in the Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) Revision (DOI-BLM-CO-S010-2020-0009-EA). Based on my review of the Environmental Assessment (EA) and project record, I have concluded that the Proposed Action was analyzed in sufficient detail to allow me to make an informed decision.

This decision 1) establishes an Appropriate Management Level (AML) of 50 to 80 adult wild horses that is in balance with the ecosystem and available forage; 2) implements the use of BLM approved fertility control measures to slow the annual rate of growth of the wild horse herd; 3) establishes monitoring criteria for initiating the removal of excess wild horses; 4) utilizes bait trapping as the preferred removal technique; 5) maintains genetic viability expressed as observed heterozygosity within the wild horse herd by periodically introducing outside horses from other similar herd management areas; 6) manages the wild horse herd to achieve a diverse age class and natural sex ratio; 7) establishes vegetation monitoring objectives for maintaining good ecological and forage conditions; and 8) authorizes additional new water developments for improving wild horse distribution across the HMA. Overall, implementation of this decision will provide long-term management guidance for sustaining a healthy wild horse herd in balance with the ecosystem, while ensuring that Public Land Health Standards developed for Colorado are being achieved.

Below is the decision, monitoring and implementation.

Management Objective(s)	Monitoring	Implementation
A. Control Population Numbers		
<p>Manage the wild horse population within an Appropriate Management Level (AML) of between 50 - 80 adult wild horses to protect the range from deterioration associated with overpopulation.</p> <p>Manage wild horses within the confines of the HMA boundaries.</p>	<p>Conduct population inventories on an annual basis or at least a minimum of every three years depending on funding.</p> <p>Determine herd size and annual growth rate through population surveys.</p> <p>Utilization monitoring will occur at the existing long-term trend sites and/or at other randomly located points within the HMA.</p> <p>Complete use pattern mapping of wild horse use within the HMA.</p> <p>Rangeland trend data will be collected at established long-term trend monitoring locations within the HMA.</p>	<p>The existing Appropriate Management level may be re-evaluated, and adjusted as needed, following analysis of resource conditions of the HMA.</p> <p>A gather will be initiated when monitoring data indicates that excess wild horses must be removed from the HMA to prevent a deterioration in range ecological conditions that will adversely affect rangeland health.</p> <p>Bait trapping techniques will be the preferred method for conducting gathers. In event that bait trapping efforts are unsuccessful a helicopter may be utilized to gather the remaining excess animals.</p> <p>Emergency gathers would be initiated in the event of extreme environmental conditions such as drought and/or wildfire which limits forage and/or water availability resulting in potential negative impacts to wild horse health and/or degradation in rangeland health conditions.</p> <p>A determination of excess wild horses will be based on at least one or more of the following monitoring triggers:</p> <p>Utilization: Average utilization levels on key forage upland species exceed 35% of the current year's growth for a period of 2 or more consecutive years.</p> <p>Use Pattern Mapping: Use pattern mapping shows that areas receiving an average utilization level of 35% or greater are expanding within the HMA.</p>

Management Objective(s)	Monitoring	Implementation
		<p>Rangeland Trend: Data collected at established long-term trend sites indicate a decline in range conditions.</p> <p>When wild horses stray outside of the HMA or onto private property.</p>
B. Additional Population Control Measures		
<p>On average strive to maintain a growth rate of less than 10 percent annually.</p> <p>Manage for a long-term sex ratio close to a natural ratio of 50% males and 50% females.</p>	<p>Annually monitor population growth.</p> <p>Assess the effectiveness of population control efforts by conducting post-fertility control monitoring of treated mares following the foaling season.</p>	<p>Continue the use of the immuno-contraceptive ZonaStat-H (native PZP) as the preferred method for reducing population growth.</p> <p>Other BLM approved fertility control methods such as PZP-22 and GonaCon-Equine may also be used for reducing population growth.</p> <p>Any new BLM approved population control vaccine formulations may be used as directed by the National Wild Horse and Burro Program. The use of any new fertility controls and/or population growth suppression methods would use the most current best management practices and humane procedures available for the implementation of new controls.</p> <p>Introduced mares will not be administered fertility control measures until after they contribute at least 1 or more foals to the population.</p>
C. Herd Age Dynamic		
<p>Manage wild horses to achieve as closely as possible the following relative age distribution:</p> <p>10 – 25% (ages 0-5) 50 – 80% (ages 6-15) 10 – 25% (age 16+)</p>	<p>Document age classes of animals through annual census information and post-gather result.</p>	<p>Maintain this information in an electronic BLM database with partners support.</p> <p>During any scheduled gathers and removals, use selective removal to help move the population closer to the desired age distribution.</p>
D. Selective Removal Criteria		
<p>Wild horses will be removed in conformance with BLM’s selective removal strategy.</p>	<p>Maintain photo records of wild horses released back into the HMA. and/or introduced from outside HMAs.</p>	<p>Priorities for removal are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Four years old and younger. 2. 11-19 years old. 3. 5-10 years old.

Management Objective(s)	Monitoring	Implementation
Maintain or improve animal conformation within the HMA.		<p>4. 20 years and older.</p> <p>In selecting horses for return to the range post-gather, animal size, conformation and genetics will be the priority.</p>
E. Maintain Observed Heterozygosity within the Population		
<p>Maintain adequate levels of observed heterozygosity within the population to avoid inbreeding by augmenting the resident population of animals from other similar HMAs.</p>	<p>In the short-term (1-2 years):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor the rate of acceptance of introduced animals into existing bands. • Monitor introduced mares to document whether they successfully breed and reproduce within 2-years of release. <p>In the long-term (10+ years):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genetic diversity will be monitored with respect to observed heterozygosity (Ho; BLM 2010). <p>Maintain photo records of introduced animals and progeny from outside HMA's.</p>	<p>Periodically introduce 2-3 horses from outside HMAs every 4 – 8 years.</p> <p>Mares selected for introduction would be from herds which closely resemble and exhibit the same characteristics of those within the HMA.</p> <p>Only individual horses that exhibit good health and conformation will be selected for introduction.</p> <p>Introduced horses must have a negative Coggins Test.</p> <p>Introduced mares and their offspring will not be selected for removal during scheduled gather operations unless it is deemed an emergency due to drought and/or fire.</p> <p>Collect hair samples for DNA analysis from all horses released back into the HMA following gathers and removals to detect changes from existing baseline information.</p> <p>Previous genetic testing will be used as baseline information to evaluate observed heterozygosity.</p>
F. Sustain Healthy Populations of Wild Horses		
<p>Manage wild horses to maintain, under normal range conditions, average body condition class score of four or greater.</p>	<p>Visually observe wild horse body condition (Henneke Condition Class Method) throughout the year.</p> <p>Document average body conditions during periodic gathers and/or during population inventories.</p> <p>Regularly assess forage quality and quantity as well as available water sources within the HMA during</p>	<p>Maintain existing water developments to ensure water reliability and availability.</p> <p>Construct new water developments to improve water availability and improve distribution of wild horses within the HMA.</p> <p>Consider emergency removals when needed if animal body condition is</p>

Management Objective(s)	Monitoring	Implementation
	<p>periods of persistent drought conditions.</p>	<p>less than a Henneke Condition Class Score 3 due to poor forage conditions.</p> <p>Consider emergency gathers in response to drought, wildfire or other unplanned/unforeseen events which significantly limit available forage or adequate water for sustaining a healthy wild horse herd.</p>
G. Ensure Rangeland Health		
<p>Manage wild horses within the HMA to maintain a thriving ecological balance while achieving or making significant progress toward meeting the Public Land Health Standards developed for Colorado.</p> <p>Limit utilization levels on key forage species by wild horses to no more than 35% of the current year's growth.</p> <p>Maintain or improve the trend in vegetation communities within the HMA.</p>	<p>Assess rangeland health approximately every 10 years.</p> <p>Continue to collect ecological condition monitoring data, and any other monitoring information as needed for assessing the health and productivity of existing vegetation communities.</p> <p>Utilization monitoring will occur at the existing long-term trend sites and/or at other randomly located points within the HMA.</p> <p>Develop use pattern maps of the HMA to identify over utilized areas within the HMA.</p> <p>Vegetation trend information will be collected at established long-term trend sites within the HMA.</p> <p>Continue to collect forage production information within the HMA.</p>	<p>Conduct rangeland health assessments in accordance with the most recent BLM policies and direction.</p> <p>An evaluation report documenting the findings and conclusions of land health assessments will be prepared and made available to the public.</p> <p>Use pattern mapping and/or utilization monitoring will be collected on an annual basis or when visual observations indicate that utilization levels within the HMA are approaching 35%.</p> <p>Utilization levels would be monitored during the fall/winter period timeframe in order to capture the current year growth on forage plants.</p> <p>Trend monitoring would occur at a minimum of 5 to 10-year intervals.</p> <p>Identify and establish additional site-specific resource management objectives within the HMA as needed.</p> <p>Establish additional long-term monitoring sites within the HMA if it is determined additional locations are needed.</p> <p>Evaluate and adjust AML or identify management actions to address/resolve rangeland health issues if it is determined that Standards for Rangeland Health are not being achieved and it is</p>

Management Objective(s)	Monitoring	Implementation
		<p>determined that wild horses are a causal factor.</p> <p>Any adjustments to AML will be based on both resource condition and herd monitoring.</p>
H. Assure Riparian Area Health		
<p>Maintain or improve existing riparian conditions of Wildcat Canyon.</p>	<p>Assess riparian functionality of Wildcat Canyon using the Proper Functioning Condition (PFC) method every 5-10 years.</p>	<p>Maintain existing water sources or develop new water sources as needed to lessen impacts of wild horse use on riparian areas associated with Wildcat Canyon.</p> <p>Consider excluding wild horses from natural spring complexes.</p>
I. Disperse Wild Horse Use		
<p>Disperse wild horse use throughout the Spring Creek Basin HMA so that on average no portions of the HMA receive greater than 35% utilization.</p>	<p>Measure utilization of key forage species at existing key monitoring sites and/or at randomly located points throughout the HMA.</p> <p>Develop use pattern maps of the HMA to determine under-utilized and/or over-utilized areas of the HMA by wild horses.</p> <p>Monitor movements of wild horses to determine use patterns, seasonal migrations and range of travel.</p>	<p>Maintain or re-construct existing water developments to improve distribution and utilization of the HMA by wild horses.</p> <p>Assess the need for additional water developments for improving distribution of wild horses into under-utilized portions of the HMA.</p> <p>Use population inventories, on-the-ground observations, or other tracking methods, in conjunction with use pattern mapping, to monitor movements of wild horses within the HMA, and identify preferred use areas.</p> <p>Do not allow fencing within the interior of the HMA boundary that would restrict wild horse movements.</p>
J. Fire Management		
<p>Fire may be used as a management tool for resource benefits within the HMA.</p>	<p>Natural fire ignitions will be assessed as to if they are beneficial to the existing vegetation communities.</p>	<p>Natural fire ignitions occurring within the pinyon-juniper ecologic types may be allowed to burn as a prescribed natural fire.</p> <p>Natural fire ignitions within the salt desert shrub communities will be controlled.</p>
K. Partnership Opportunities		

Management Objective(s)	Monitoring	Implementation
Provide partnership opportunities to stakeholders, organizations, other agencies, universities, adjacent landowners, and the interested public in monitoring efforts, existing range improvement maintenance activities, new range improvement construction and education activities associated with management of the HMA.	Maintain an updated interested public list for Spring Creek Basin HMA. Send all appropriate notices, links, e-mails and/or hard copies of all wild horse management documents to those on this list.	Continue to partner with volunteer groups in the management of wild horses within Spring Creek Basin HMA. Periodically review and update as needed any Memorandum of Understandings between the BLM and potential partners.
L. Education and Outreach		
Increase public awareness of wild horse issues and management efforts through public education and outreach programs.	Periodically request feedback from all partners and interested public as to effectiveness of public outreach efforts by BLM.	Develop and distribute informational brochures highlighting wild horses and associated management within the Spring Creek Basin HMA. Pursue educational outreach opportunities with local school groups, universities, advocacy groups and interested public. Develop and place informational signage and/or kiosks at the entrance of the HMA regarding wild horses and management actions.

Monitoring Plan

Monitoring Item	How	Who	When
Manage Spring Creek Basin HMA within the established AML to protect the range from deterioration associated with overpopulation.	Population inventories and annual growth rate estimates may be conducted from the ground and/or aerial flights of the HMA.	BLM Resource Specialists will be the only ones allowed to engage in aerial surveys conducted by BLM. BLM, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations could coordinate herd size counting efforts on the ground to estimate horse herd size at a given time within the HMA.	Conduct population inventories on an annual basis when possible, or at a minimum of every three years.
Ensure all age classes are represented post gather.	Record ages of animals released post-gather.	BLM Resource Specialist, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Every scheduled gather.
Maintain adequate levels of observed heterozygosity within the wild horse population.	Collect hair samples for DNA analysis from all horses released back into the HMA following	BLM Resource Specialist, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Every regularly scheduled gather.

Monitoring Item	How	Who	When
	gathers to detect changes from existing baseline genetic information.		
Manage wild horses to achieve an average Henneke body condition class score of 4 or greater.	<p>Visually observe wild horse body condition class (Henneke condition class method).</p> <p>Record average body condition and document other health conditions (i.e. lameness, clubfoot etc.).</p>	BLM Resource Specialist, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Population inventories, other site visits and scheduled gathers.
Manage for a long-term sex ratio close to a natural ratio of 50% males and 50% females.	Document number of mares/stallions during population inventory and post gathers.	BLM Resource Specialist, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Population inventories and scheduled gathers.
Continually Assess Rangeland Health conditions within the HMA to determine if Public Land Health Standards developed for Colorado are being met.	<p>Assess rangeland health following the procedures outlined in Technical Reference 1734-6 and/or the most recent rangeland health technical reference adopted by the BLM.</p> <p>Collect additional quantitative monitoring data such as species composition, vegetation trend, vegetation cover, bare ground, utilization and vegetation production data and/or any other data as needed to assess Range Land Health conditions.</p>	BLM Resource Specialist, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Approximately every 10 years for comprehensive Land Health Assessments.
Functionality of existing riparian areas associated with Wildcat Canyon.	Conduct a condition assessment of riparian areas associated with Wildcat Canyon	BLM Resource Specialist, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Approximately every 5 years.
Manage for utilization levels of no more than 35% on average for key forage perennial grass and shrub species within the HMA.	<p>Collect utilization and/or use pattern mapping within the HMA.</p> <p>Utilization monitoring will occur at the existing long-term trend sites and/or at randomly located points within the HMA.</p> <p>Utilization pattern mapping will occur to identify the use areas of</p>	BLM Resource Specialists. Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations may assist BLM in data collection.	Periodically within a 10-year period collect utilization and/or use pattern mapping data.

Monitoring Item	How	Who	When
	wild horses within the HMA.		
Maintain or improve vegetation trend within the HMA.	Evaluate vegetative trend by re-reading the established long-term trend monitoring sites within the HMA.	BLM Resource Specialists, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations may assist BLM in data collection.	A minimum of every 5 – 10 years for vegetation trend studies.
Maintain and/or improve an adequate amounts of forage quantity and quality for wild horses.	Periodically assess the forage capability of the HMA.	BLM Resource Specialists, Volunteers and/or Partnership Organizations.	Periodically within a 10-year period.

Proposed Water Catchments - The BLM will construct up to two new water catchments within the HMA. Please refer to Map 1 (in the EA) for catchment locations. Each water catchment would consist of a 25 x 100-foot above ground steel rain collection structure, polypropylene storage tanks, a short pipeline and a trough equipped with wildlife escape ramps. **Authorities:** The authority for this decision is contained in the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971; Section 302(b) of the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act of 1976; Public Rangeland Improvement Act of 1978; Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations § 4710.3-1 and the 2015 Tres Rios Field Office Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (2015).

Compliance and Monitoring: Implementation of the Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) will be in accordance with the monitoring plan identified in the Proposed Action Alternative that are hereby incorporated as part of this Decision.

PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY:

The proposed action is in conformance with the following desired conditions and management objectives contained in the approved Tres Rios Field Office Resource Management Plan & Record of Decision (February 27, 2015):

Desired Conditions

- 3.9.1 The Spring Creek Basin wild horse herd population is within an acceptable range.
- 3.9.2 Maintain adequate levels of genetic diversity, to avoid excessive levels of inbreeding.
- 3.9.3 Vegetation is diverse and provides enough cover in order to reduce salinity and to prevent sediment from reaching Disappointment Creek and the Dolores River.
- 3.9.4 The herd is managed via a combination of traditional and non-traditional methods including bait trapping, fertility control programs, or other methods accepted by the National Wild Horse and Burro program.

3.9.5 Vegetation within the HMA is in a stable or upward trend, including diverse species composition and reduced erosion to provide a resilient ecosystem.

3.9.6 The Gypsum Valley cat-eye and pygmy sagebrush populations are maintained.

Objectives

3.9.7 Within 5 years, revise the Spring Creek Basin HMAP (BLM 1994a) to incorporate specific goals, objectives, and techniques to guide management of the Spring Creek Basin HMA, including management of Gypsum Valley cat-eye and pygmy sagebrush.

Periodic Introduction of Wild Horses within the Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area (HMA) in order to Maintain Genetic Viability (CO-SJFO-01-053 EA). This environmental assessment analyzed the impacts of periodically introducing mares from outside HMAs for maintaining the observed heterozygosity within the existing wild horse population.

Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area Bait Trap Gathers Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-CO-S010-2015-0001 EA) analyzed the impacts of using bait trapping as BLM's preferred method for removing excess wild horses from the HMA.

Alternatives Considered: The BLM analyzed and considered a No Action Alternative which would have continued implementation of the management objectives outlined in the 1994 Spring Creek Basin Herd Area Management Plan. This alternative would have 1) maintained the existing AML between 35 and 65 adult horses within a range of 10% on either side; 2) continued to utilize a helicopter as the preferred gather method; and 3) maintained allowable utilization levels on key forage species of 50% during the growing season and 55% during the dormant season.

Additional alternative actions considered but not carried forward for analysis was the use of Intrauterine Devices (IUDs), sterilization and sex ratio adjustments of 30-40% for mares within the population. These alternatives for potential controlling population growth were not considered because they would have similar effects of using fertility control vaccines incorporated in the proposed action alternative.

Rationale for Decision: This decision (the Proposed Action) will manage for a wild horse herd between 50 – 80 adult animals which results in a herd that is in balance with available forage while ensuring that rangeland health standards are being met within the HMA. In addition, the increase in AML combined with periodically introducing wild horses from outside herd management areas would reduce the potential for inbreeding and loss of heterozygosity within the herd.

This decision continues fertility control techniques for reducing the rate of population growth of the wild horse herd. Reducing population growth would significantly increase the amount of time between potential gathers of excess wild horses. In the event gathers become necessary, the preferred method for removing excess wild horses will be through bait trapping. Bait trapping will provide BLM greater flexibility in selecting specific bands and/or individual horses for removal, increase the number of potential trap site locations and increase flexibility in relation to seasonal timeframes for conducting gathers. However, the use of a helicopter may still be used for removal of wild horses if bait trapping is unsuccessful in meeting gather objectives.

This decision authorizes the construction of additional water sources within underutilized areas of the HMA improving wild horse distribution across the HMA.

This decision includes a comprehensive monitoring plan establishing specific objectives and timeframes for monitoring both the health of the wild horse herd as well as resource conditions within the HMA. Implementation of the monitoring plan will allow BLM the flexibility to make necessary adjustments in the management of the wild horse herd as needed to continue meeting the public land health standards developed for Colorado.

The no action alternative was not selected because it would maintain the exiting AML at a level between 35 and 65 adult wild horses. The analysis contained within the EA determined that resource conditions within the HMA could support a slight increase in the number of wild horses which would help to reduce the potential for inbreeding and loss of heterozygosity of the herd.

The no action alternative would continue an allowable utilization level of 50% during the growing season and 55% during the dormant (fall/winter) on key forage species. The continued high allowable use levels combined with yearlong grazing would more than likely lead to range degradation and loss of the forage base within the HMA over time.

Administrative Remedies: Any person who is adversely affected by this decision may file an appeal in accordance with 43 CFR part 4 and 43 CFR §4770.3(a). If you wish to appeal this decision, within 30 days of the signing of the decision you must file a notice of appeal in writing with the Field Manager, Tres Rios Field Office, 29211 Highway 184, Dolores, Colorado 81323. BLM Colorado will not accept a notice of appeal transmitted electronically (e.g., by email, facsimile, or social media means).

The appeal must state clearly and concisely why you think the decision is in error.

Should you wish to file a petition for stay, in accordance with 43 CFR 4.21(b), the petition must show sufficient justification based on the following standards:

- 1) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied.
- 2) The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits.
- 3) The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and
- 4) Whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

The person requesting the stay bears the burden to show that a stay should be granted. If you decide to submit a petition for stay of the decision, a copy of the notice of appeal and petition for stay must be served simultaneously upon the persons and offices identified below:

Field Manager
Tres Rios Field Office
29211 Highway 184
Dolores, Colorado 81323

Office of the Regional Solicitor
Rocky Mountain Region
755 Parfet Street, Suite 151
Lakewood, Colorado 80215

Office of Hearings and Appeals

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Interior Board of Land Appeals
801 North Quincy Street, Suite 300
Arlington, Virginia 22203

The Office of Hearings and Appeals regulations do not provide for electronic filing of appeals; therefore, they will not be accepted.

Authorized Officer

Date