

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Bureau of Land Management

Cedar City Field Office
176 East DL Sargent Drive
Cedar City, UT 84721
(435) 865-3000

DECISION RECORD

**Bible Spring Complex Wild Horse Gather Plan
DOI-BLM-UT-C010-2022-0012-EA**

I. DECISION:

Based on my review and consideration of the EA and FONSI, it is my decision to select and implement Alternative 1 as described in the attached EA. In implementing fertility control measures, when practical, BLM will focus on treating and releasing older mares that have already contributed their genetics to the herd. This decision is effective immediately pursuant to 43 CFR § 4770.3(c).

II. COMPLIANCE AND MONITORING:

As described in Chapter 4 of the EA, BLM personnel will collect and maintain data during gather and removal operations. An Animal and Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) or other licensed veterinarian will be on-site, if needed, to examine animals and make recommendations to BLM for care and treatment of the wild horses. Population inventory via aerial survey will be conducted every three to four years on the HMAs as required by the WFRHBA and BLM policy. Vegetation monitoring studies (e.g., rangeland health, trend, and utilization) will continue to be conducted in conjunction with livestock, wildlife, and wild horse use.

III. AUTHORITIES:

The authority for this Decision is contained in Section 1333(a) of the Wild and Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195) (WFRHBA), Section 302(b) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 USC 1701 *et seq.*), and regulations at 43 CFR Part 4700.

IV. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Based on identified issues, three alternatives were considered in detail.

Alternative 1: Proposed Action – Gather and remove excess wild horses to within AML and implement population growth suppression.

Alternative 2: Gather and remove excess wild horses without population growth suppression.

Alternative 3: No Action

V. PUBLIC INVOLVMENT

Notification of the proposed action was posted on the BLM's ePlanning website on February 24, 2022 (<https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2018159/510>). The BLM offered a 30-day public comment period on the EA beginning May 18, 2022. The EA information was provided on the project's ePlanning website and announced through a news release, letters and emails. Public comments are summarized in Appendix 12 of the EA.

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VI. RATIONALE FOR DECISION:

As discussed in the EA, BLM has determined that there are excess wild horses within and outside the Blawn Wash, Four Mile, Bible Spring, and Tilly Creek Herd Management Areas (HMAs) and that excess horses need to be removed and population growth suppressed to restore and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance within BLM's multiple use mandate. The current estimated population is over 831 wild horses within the HMAs. This is well above the lower AML of 80 horses. Analysis of ongoing monitoring data indicates that wild horses are contributing to the degradation of rangeland health through heavy and severe utilization levels, trailing, and trampling of riparian areas.

Precipitation data indicate that the HMAs have received only 30-50% of normal moisture, placing the HMAs in extreme drought from summer 2020 through the present time. As a result of this drought cycle, there is substantially reduced forage and water availability for wild horses, resulting in near emergency conditions, particularly in the lower elevations. The perennial key forage species have exhibited minimal growth, and perennial grasses have not recovered in some locations. Heavy and severe utilization levels due to excess wild horses have continued to suppress recovery of these key forage plants.

The overriding limiting factor for the carrying capacity of the horses in the HMAs is not the available forage, although this is a concern; rather, it is the supply of reliable water during the summer months. During the current drought conditions several water sources dry up for part of the year, concentrating wild horses on the remaining water sources and limiting the number of horses that the HMAs can support.

BLM would strive to reach low AML as quickly as possible, but it is expected that gather efficiencies and holding space available during the initial gather would not allow for the attainment of low AML during the initial gather. Based on the BLM's experience with past gathers conducted in the project area, only 60-70% of the population can typically be gathered in a single gather operation due to excessive tree cover, vast area, terrain, and behavior of the target animals. Nationwide, off-range corral and off-range pasture holding space for excess wild horses removed from the range is limited. In order to facilitate gathers and make progress toward management objectives, numerous BLM districts throughout the West have implemented phased gather operations in which a portion of the excess wild horses are removed during the initial gather along with implementation of population controls, with additional excess wild horses to be removed during follow-up gather(s) to achieve and maintain the AML goals. The approach authorized in this Decision is consistent with Instruction Memorandum 2019-004, Issuance of Wild Horse and Burro Gather Decisions.

In summary, implementation of this decision will result in the following:

- Achieve HMAs population levels at the lower end of the AML range by removing excess horses and implementing population growth suppression.
- In the long term, maintain the wild horse populations within the HMAs at a level within the established AML.
- Reduce negative impacts to rangeland resources from an excess of wild horses and promote the improvement of wild horse habitat within the HMAs. This will ensure progress towards attainment of standards for healthy rangelands and that healthy populations of wild horses are maintained in a thriving natural ecological balance for generations.

Decreasing the numbers of excess wild horses on the range is consistent with findings and recommendations from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), American Horse Protection Association (AHPA), the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP), Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Government Accountability Office (GAO), Office of Inspector General (OIG) and current BLM policy.

VII. RIGHT OF PROTEST AND/OR APPEAL:

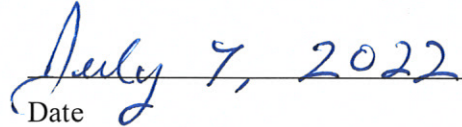
This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with 43 C.F.R. Part 4. Instructions for filing and appeal are contained on the attached Form 1842-1.

VIII. APPROVAL



Paul N. Briggs

Cedar City Field Manager


Date

Attachments:

DOI-BLM-UT-C010-2022-0012-EA

Form 1842-1

