Big Sandy, Alamo, and Lake Havasu Herd Management Area Wild Burro Gather and Population Control Plan Environmental Assessment

Decision Record

DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2023-0025-EA

September 2024

DECISION RECORD
Big Sandy Alamo, and Lake Havasu Herd Management Areas (Three Rivers Complex)
Wild Burro Gather and Population Control Plan
Mohave, Yavapai, and La Paz Counties

Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2023-0025-EA

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The Bureau of Land Management, Kingman Field Office and Lake Havasu Field Office (BLM) has analyzed the potential impacts of several wild burro management alternatives for the Big Sandy, Alamo, and Havasu Herd Management Areas (HMAs) (Three Rivers Complex) in Mohave, Yavapai, and La Paz counties, Arizona. The Three Rivers Complex covers approximately 955,000 acres of public, state, and private lands.

Management of wild burros in the Three Rivers Complex is guided by the Lake Havasu RMP and the Kingman RMP. The Kingman RMP set the Appropriate Management Level (AML) for the Big Sandy HMA at 139 wild burros. The Lake Havasu RMP set the AML for the Alamo HMA at 160 wild burros, and the Lake Havasu HMA at 166 wild burros. The AML is defined as the number of adult wild burros that can be sustained within a designated HMA to achieve and maintain a TNEB in keeping with the multiple-use and sustained yield management of the area.

Based on recent information, the BLM has determined that there are approximately 1,794 wild burros above AML within the Three Rivers Complex. These excess wild burros need to be removed in order to achieve a thriving natural ecological balance (TNEB) and prevent further degradation of rangeland resources.

The environmental assessment (EA) analyzed the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts of five alternatives. The alternatives included: Seven other alternatives were considered, but not analyzed in detail (refer to Chapter 2 of the EA).

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Big Sandy, Alamo, and Havasu HMA Wild Burro Gather and Population Control Plan Environmental Assessment (EA), DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2023-0025-EA, was posted for public review on the project ePlanning site for a 30-day period from September 11 through October 11, 2023. Comments received after the official end of the comment period were also considered.

Comment letters were received from approximately 80 individuals, Federal agencies, State agencies, and non-governmental organizations by email, fax or mail. Organizations included the Wild Horse Education, Big Sandy Natural Resource Conservation District, Mohave County Farm and Livestock Bureau, Take Action 4 Horses!, Advocates for Wild Equines Lobby, Arizona Farm Bureau Federation, New Jersey Wild Horse and Burro Advocates, the Desert Tortoise Council, American Wild Horse Campaign, Friends of Animals, The Cloud Foundation, and The Human Society of the United States. State agencies that commented include the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Tribal responses were received from the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

The Colorado River District, Kingman Field Office published a news release on September 11, 2023, that was sent to media outlets listed on the Arizona BLM State Office media list and posted to the Bureau of Land Management's Information webpage at: https://www.blm.gov/press-release/blm-seeks-public-comment-proposed-wild-burro-management-plan-western-arizona. Potentially affected or interested tribes were sent letters that included a description of the proposed project, a map of the project location, and an invitation for comments or feedback regarding the project. These Tribes are listed in Chapter 5 of the Final EA. Comments received were categorized and responded to as applicable in Appendix S.

LAND USE PLAN CONFORMANCE

The proposed action and other action alternatives are in conformance with the Kingman RMP (BLM 1995) the Lower Gila North MFP (BLM 1983) and the Lake Havasu Field Office RMP (BLM 2007), as required by regulations found in Title 43 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), section 1610.5-3(a). Specific decisions from the RMP and the other plans are outlined in Section 1.3 of the EA.

AUTHORITY

The authority for this Decision is contained in Section 1333 (a) of the 1971 Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act, Section 302(b) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976, and Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) at 43 CFR §4700.

RATIONALE

Upon analyzing the impacts of the Proposed Action and other Alternatives, and following issuance of the EA for public review and, I have determined that implementing Alternative A, the Proposed Action Alternative as described in Chapter 2 of the EA, with incorporated standard operating procedures (found in the numerous EA appendices) will not have a significant impact to the human environment and that an EIS is not required. The rationale in the attached FONSI supports this decision. This decision is consistent with the Kingman RMP (BLM 1995) the Lower Gila North MFP (BLM 1983) and the Lake Havasu Field Office RMP (BLM 2007), as amended and the Lake Havasu Field Office RMP (BLM 2007).

As determined by an interdisciplinary team analysis (contained in DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2023-0025-EA), excess wild burros are present within Three Rivers Complex and need to be removed to restore a thriving natural ecological balance. The current estimated population of 2,259 wild burros is 385% of the Appropriate Management Level (AML) established through prior BLM decisions. In addition, analysis of ongoing monitoring data indicates that yearlong grazing use by wild burros is degrading rangeland health through heavy and severe utilization levels in localized areas. In addition to degradation of the rangeland and lack of forage, the wild burros are competing heavily with native wildlife which also depend on these areas for forage and water. The current population of wild burros is in excess of the established AMLs of 465 that is authorized within the HMAs. In order to allow for recovery and upward trends in rangeland health, protect wildlife habitat, ensure long term health and success of the wild burro population and prevent widespread starvation and death of individual animals due to lack of forage during future seasons, gathers must be conducted to remove excess wild burros.

The gather is necessary to remove excess wild burros and to bring the wild burro population to the established AML range in order to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance between wild burros and other multiple uses as required under Section 1333(a) of the 1971 Wild Free Roaming

Horse and Burro Act (WFRHBA) and Section 302(b) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976.

The BLM is required to manage multiple uses to avoid degradation of public rangelands. The removal of excess wild burros is necessary to protect rangeland resources from deterioration or impacts associated with the current overpopulation of wild burros within the Three Rivers Complex. This action will help reduce the population size to the established AMLs and implement fertility controls to reduce the rate of population growth and need for additional gathers.

Leaving excess wild burros on the range under the No Action Alternative would not comply with the WFRHBA or applicable regulations and Bureau policy, nor will it comply with the Kingman RMP (BLM 1995) the Lower Gila North MFP (BLM 1983) or the Lake Havasu Field Office RMP (BLM 2007). The No Action Alternative would result in continued deterioration of rangeland resources, including vegetative, soil and riparian resources, and could potentially lead to the irreversible loss of native vegetative communities. Wild burros would continue to relocate in increasing numbers to areas outside the HMA boundaries due to competition for limited water, forage and space within the HMA, adversely impacting public and private land resources not designated for wild burro management and increasing the potential for hazardous burro-vehicle collisions. The No Action Alternative also increases the likelihood of emergency conditions to occur which is expected to lead to the death or suffering of individual animals or to an emergency gather in order to prevent suffering or death due to insufficient forage or water.

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Big Sandy, Alamo, and Lake Havasu Herd Management Area Wild Burro Gather and Population Control Plan Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2023-0025-EA, and after carefully considering comments and input received during scoping and public review of the document, it is my decision to:

Approve the Proposed Action (Alternative A), with the identified Best Management Practices (BMPs), design features, stipulations, and mitigation measures as identified in Chapters 2 and appendices of the EA document. This management decision for the Big Sandy, Alamo, and Lake Havasu Herd Management Area Wild Burro Gather and Population Control Plan Project is issued pursuant to the regulations found at Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) §4700.

After reviewing all the facts and considering public comments on the EA, it is my decision to implement the Proposed Action (Alternative A) as described in the Big Sandy, Alamo, and Lake Havasu Herd Management Area Wild Burro Gather and Population Control Plan Environmental Assessment (DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2023-0025-EA) and summarized below.

Implementation of this decision will:

- Gather and remove approximately 1,794 excess wild burros from areas in and adjacent to the HMAs (approximately 1,247 burros from the Alamo HMA, approximately 283 burros from the Big Sandy HMA and approximately 264 burros from the Lake Havasu HMA) to get to the established AMLs of 465 burros (160 adult burros Alamo Lake HMA, 166 burros Havasu HMA and 139 burros Big Sandy HMA).
- All excess wild burros residing in areas outside of the HMAs would be gathered and removed.

- BLM would conduct subsequent maintenance gathers as necessary over the 10-year period to remove additional wild burros to maintain the population at AML. BLM would continue to implement the fertility control components of Alternative A by adjusting the population to maintain the 60/40 sex ratio in the HMA and use fertility control vaccines to treat or booster jennies in the complex, so that up to approximately 50% of the female burros remaining in each HMA are infertile at any given time. The target removal numbers for follow-up gathers, fertility treatments, and sex ratio adjustments would be adjusted based on periodic monitoring and population inventories for the Three Rivers Complex. The combination of these actions is intended to lower the population growth rate within the complex in order to extend the intervals between removals.
- Once AML is reached, BLM would maintain approximately 60% males and 40% females in each HMA to achieve a 60/40 male to female sex ratio (66 females Lake Havasu HMA, 55 females Big Sandy HMA, 64 females Alamo HMA). BLM would gather up to 50% of the remaining female burros in each HMA (33 females Lake Havasu HMA, 28 females Big Sandy HMA, 32 females Alamo HMA) and administer fertility control vaccines using the most currently approved formula.
- The BLM would utilize all approved gather methods, including bait trapping, helicopter drive trapping, and roping if necessary, to gather wild burros. The BLM would follow the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) found in Appendix F, Appendix G, and BLM Handbook 4700-1 Wild Horses and Burros Management Handbook. Gather methods would be determined on a case-by-case basis depending on access, time of year, funding, personnel availability and the difficulty of gathering the burros (due to terrain, weather, water and forage availability, and/or number of burros to be gathered).
- Promote the improvement of rangeland resources within the Three Rivers Complex, including wild burro range and wildlife habitat, by allowing rangeland health to improve and avoiding negative impacts to rangeland resources from an overpopulation of wild burros. This will ensure that significant progress towards maintaining the Standards for Rangeland Health occurs and ensure healthy populations of wild burros are maintained in a thriving ecological balance for generations.

This decision is effective immediately pursuant to 43 CFR 4770.3(c).

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR, Part 4 and the attached Form 1842-1.

APPROVING OFFICIAL

AMANDA DODSON

Digitally signed by AMANDA DODSON
Date: 2024.09.13 15:13:52 -07'00'

Amanda M. Dodson
Field Manager
Kingman Field Office

Date

Attachment:
Form 1842-1