

WH&B RMP Meeting – Horses
07-21-05

The WH&B Act and our BLM regs state wild horses will be considered for management in areas where they existed at the passage of the December, 2001 Act.

In 1974 the LSFO recognized 2 locations where wild horses were present: The Sand Wash Basin and Douglas Mountain Herd use Areas.

Douglas Mountain Herd: The Douglas Mountain HUA is located in the SW portion of LSFO and included private and park Service lands. This herd was closed from management in 1977 primarily because the herd's home range extended beyond BLM public lands onto Park Service (Dinosaur National Monument, and private land owners).

Sand Wash HMA: The same document recognized horses would be managed in the Sand Wash herd in conjunction with livestock and wildlife, managed at the then-current level of 160 horses. The boundaries identified in 1977 are the same as those today. Sand Wash Basin Herd Management Area (HMA) encompasses 157,730 acres and includes: Federal, private, and state lands.

The Sand Wash herd is fenced into this management area with the exception of a span along HWY 318. The fence requires BLM to assure the critical elements required by animals: forage, water and cover are adequate within the fenced HMA to support a healthy herd of wild horses.

Planning documents for the Sand Wash Herd:

The 1977 Vermillion Planning Document brought forth the earliest management directives for the Sand Wash herd.

The initial HMAP was completed in 1982. The HMAP brings provides herd demographic history and brings forth management direction identified in the 1977 Vermillion Planning Document. The HMAP is due for revision.

The 1989 LSFO RMP carries the AMI forward.

The 1995; 1998 and 2001 Gather Plan/EAs re-evaluated the Sand Wash herd AML.

BLM Management:

Primary management actions for this herd has been completion of census to determine herd size and removal projects to reduce herd size to a level compatible with the resources.

Other, ongoing management actions include bi-annual vegetative monitoring; water development and fence maintenance.

The earliest BLM wild horse census took place in 1971 and was completed using a fixed-wing aircraft. The flight documented 65 wild horses.

Since 1971 herd numbers have risen as high as 418 in 1988, and 455 horses in 1995.

.BLM has completed five (5) capture operations between 1988 and 2001 with a total of 903 horses removed from the herd.

AML:

AML identified in the 1982 HMAP was a single number: 160 head

AML identified in the 1989 RMP was 130-160 horses

1995 Gather Plan/EA established a single number AML of 217 horses. This AML adjustment was the result of court rulings determining wild horse AML must be obtained through the analysis of current range monitoring data; and then-program policy stating that AML would be the mid-point management level of a herd. The gather schedule in 1995 was at 3 year intervals.

The 217 AML was carried through the 1998 gather Plan/EA.

2001 Gather Plan/EA established a single number AML of 363 wild horses and a management range of 163-362 horses. Program guidance at that time stated that AML would be identified as the top end of the management range and that the herd would be managed on a 4 rather than a 3 year cycle.

2005 Gather Plan/EA proposes carrying forward the AML range of 163 to 362 wild horses, that the AML includes the range and that the range be spanned over a 4 year time period.

In spite of what appears numerous AML changes, between 1974 and post-gather, 2001 Sand Wash has averaged a herd of 227 horses.

Our current 163-362 management range averages the herd at 8 more than is historic; or 235 horses.

Removal History:

The herd size has been lowered by BLM 5 times.

The 1979 and 1988 were random gate cut removals; no age selection.

The 1995, 1998 and 2001 gathers were age selective.

1995: 9 and younger removed

1998: 9 and younger removed

2001: under 6 and over 9 removed.

In spite of age selective gather, herd age structure has remained pyramidal with the majority of horses present in the younger age classes.

Herd genetic tests: The herd was tested for genetics in 1995 and in 2001s. Test results concluded the SW herd contains high individual genetic variation when compared to both domestic and feral horses in other herds. The animals have the highest genetic similarity to the North American breeds including Quarter horse, Saddlebred and Morgan. There is some Spanish origin in the herd but the Spanish origin appears similar to the Spanish genetics present in the Saddlebred and Morgan breeds.

Age selection, Recruitment, Immunocontraception

Herd recruitment or the annual increase in herd size, has varied between 1995 and 2005 between 21 and 24%.

Current policy requires that each herd be considered for immunocontraception; fertility control. The method is through implanting time release capsules into selected mares. The drug is good for as long as 22 months – just shy of 2 years.

Fertility control has never been used in the Sand Wash horses. The procedure will be brought through the RMP process for public participation.

Management Challenges

Oil and gas activity: Almost 100% of the Sand Wash HMA is already leased to O&G industry

Recreation/Human disturbance: The 1982 HMAP identifies that wild horse migration in the HMA and the incident of horses leaving the HMA will likely increase because of increases in human activity in the Basin. Greatest challenge is how to fit recreation into wild horse management. The HMA must contain all the resources needed to sustain a healthy, viable horse population...wildlife can migrate...horses by law remain inside their fence.

Wildlife competition (elk): CDOW studies suggest a decrease in antelope in the Basin and increased elk numbers. Elk and wild horse diet exhibit overlap, especially in the winter and spring. Elk immigration has occurred on the southern and eastern portions of the HMA in the Nipple Rim/Seven Mile and 2-Bar/G Spring vicinities, primarily in the mid-winter through early spring. (my observations)

Domestic horse permit adjoining HMA: Current guidance states that domestic horses not be permitted in allotments adjoining wild horse HMAs when management problems occur; namely, horses get onto the wrong side of the fence. Sombrero Ranch was licensed for domestic horse use prior to establishment of the SW HMA. There are increasing incidents of horses crossing onto the wrong side of the fence; primarily because of increased human presence in the area and gates being left open. Sombrero and LSFO have a good working relationship so to date the horse crossing problems have been successfully met.

Water availability: Water is the primary limiting factor in the HMA. The 1988 gather was an emergency action brought about by over 400 horses and below normal precipitation. The 2001 gather was not formally an emergency gather but BLM was delivering water to the horses prior to the fall gather. Worth noting each time an emergency or near-emergency has occurred are when the horse pop exceeds 400 animals.

The horses rely primarily on man-made ponds. There are 5 developed water sources – but only 4 provide dependable water

Shepherd

Lake Draw

Coffeepot

Two-Bar

There are at least 4 undeveloped springs that are primarily dependable

G Spring

Hydraulic Spring

Lang Spring and Wild Horse Spring

Lang and Hydraulic are on private land.

Drought and Resource Conditions

Drought in SW Basin was officially recognized in November, 2001 but existed at least the summer before – as evidenced by LSFO hauling water to the horse herd beginning in July prior to the September gather. Precipitation has remained below normal since 2001 and appears now to be on a recovery track although the area is still recognized in the drought 1 category - which is moderate. The 2001-2005 drought is longest period of recognized, consecutive years of below normal precipitation since 1958. Prior to 1958 Sand Wash basin experienced no more than two (2) years of consecutive drought.