United States Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management

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**INFORMATION MEMORANDUM FOR NEVADA STATE DIRECTOR**

**FROM:** Doug Furtado, Field Manager

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**SUBJECT: EMERGING ISSUES/EMERGENCY ON CALLAGHAN COMPLEX WILD HORSE HERD MANAGEMENT AREA**

**I. SUMMARY**

The purpose of this summary is to briefly outline the main issues regarding the Callaghan Complex and need for wild horse gather approval this winter. Please refer to the accompanying **Interdisciplinary Team Report** prepared by the MLFO for additional detail and photos.

The Callaghan Complex includes the Bald Mountain, Callaghan, and Rocky Hills Herd Management Areas (HMAs).

The MLFO issued an Environmental Assessment (EA) for this gather in September 2008. The MLFO is ready to issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Decision as soon as approval for the gather is received.

Substantial overpopulation of wild horses above established levels in conjunction with continuing drought conditions has created the likelihood for widespread emergency conditions due to lack of winter forage.

Since spring 2008, the MLFO has been monitoring these areas for vegetation and water availability and wild horse body condition. In some locations, wild horse condition is Moderately Thin (Henneke Body Condition Score -- 4), and is not ideal going into winter.

Due to the drought conditions and the excess number of wild horses on the range, all permittees have voluntarily reduced their current numbers. Fewer than 10 head of cattle remain within the Bald Mountain or Callaghan HMAs and the permittees within the Rocky Hills HMA are hauling water for livestock.

In order to protect important habitat, allow for future rangeland health, and prevent wild horse death due to starvation, the BLM needs to gain approval to conduct these gathers as soon as possible this fall/winter before wild horse condition declines further.

**II. DISCUSSION**

1. **Continued drought conditions prevail in the area**

Drought conditions (47% average precipitation) have resulted in very low forage production in already degraded winter range.

Only 1.68 inches of precipitation was received during the critical growth period this spring (March-June), or 39% of the historical average for the area. Drought conditions in this area have been documented for 7 of the past 14 years.

1. **Inadequate forage and water to support the current population**

The population of the Callaghan Complex exceeds 1,800 wild horses. The Appropriate Management Level (AML) range for the HMAs is 349-595 wild horses.

The current population is more than 5 times the level established through Final Multiple Use Decisions (FMUDs) 1995-2005. Wild horses are moving outside of HMA boundaries to find forage and water. Horses have been utilizing forage and water on private land.

1. **Animal Health**

During a March 2008 helicopter census wild horses within the Callaghan and Bald Mountain HMAs were noted to be Henneke Body Condition Score (BCS) 4, Moderately Thin. Numerous Thin (BCS-3) horses were observed on the Grass Valley Allotment portion of the HMA.

Groups of wild horses in the northeast portion of Bald Mountain have been noted as BCS-4 with accentuated shoulders, hips, and necks. These horses are going into winter in less than optimal condition, and will only decline further as winter progresses.

1. **Rangeland Health**

The critical winter range provides very little forage, and certainly inadequate for the current population of wild horses.

Throughout the Bald Mountain and Callaghan HMAs, current year’s production of perennial grasses in lower elevations (foothills and valley bottoms), is very low, and averages 10-20 pounds to the acre.

Some sites are completely denuded of perennial grasses, and support halogeton and other invasive annual weeds. Many springs are dry, and the overpopulation of wild horses has and continues to degrade riparian areas throughout the Complex.

1. **Appropriate actions taken concerning livestock use**

Livestock use throughout these HMAs has been far below permitted levels, and were removed from the range early. 2008 Actual Use to date reflects 51% of authorized use.

**III. CONCLUSION**

Continuing drought conditions and overpopulation of wild horses within the Callaghan has caused a situation where available resources are inadequate to support a healthy wild horse population through the 2009 winter. MLFO staff expect decline of wild horse body condition followed by suffering, and death without a gather to remove excess wild horses. The magnitude of the emergency will worsen with the depth of snow that falls on the winter range.

The MLFO evaluated three Alternatives (including fertility control and modification of sex ratios) in the Environmental Assessment completed for this gather. The Interdisciplinary Team Evaluation further identifies the options of implementation of a selective removal or gate cut gather.

To prevent emergency conditions and death of wild horses due to starvation, the MLFO needs to complete a gather before the middle of winter. Based on the analysis in the IDT Evaluation and EA, the MLFO recommends approval of a selective removal gather with implementation of fertility control to remove approximately 1,480 wild horses from the range, and treat 130-150 mares with fertility control vaccine (PZP-22). The contract cost of this proposal would be approximately $567,000. Additional costs would be associated with short and long-term holding and adoption of the animals once removed from the range.

**PREPARED BY**: Shawna Richardson, Wild horse and Burro Specialist **DATE:** 11/20/08