**ISSUE PAPER November 21, 2008**

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Nevada

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**SUBJECT: GATHER APPROVAL REQUESTED FOR CALLAGHAN COMPLEX HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS PRIOR TO JANUARY 2009**

**I. SUMMARY**

BLM Nevada is requesting approval for a gather to remove about 1,450 excess wild horses from theBald Mountain, Callaghan, and Rocky Hills (Callaghan Complex) Herd Management Areas (HMAs) beginning in December 2008. Expected performance time is 30-40 days. An Environmental Assessment (EA) for this gather was prepared in September 2008. A Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Decision Record will be issued as soon as approval for the gather is received.

The current horse population within the complex is more than 5 times the low range of the AML and it has been six years or more since the HMAs within the complex were last gathered. The current overpopulation of wild horses within the HMAs, coupled with the effects of continuing drought, is placing the animals at widespread risk of starvation during winter 2008-2009. The available forage is not adequate to support the current population of wild horses, many of which are entering winter in Henneke body condition score 4 (moderately thin).

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

In order to protect important habitat, prevent further range deterioration, and prevent wild horse death due to starvation, approval to conduct these gathers as soon as possible is needed 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.

At the present time, 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; their condition will only decline further as winter progresses.

1. **Rangeland Health**

The critical wild horse winter range provides very little forage, and is inadequate to support the current overpopulation in a healthy condition during the coming winter. Current year’s production averages 10-20 pounds to the acre in lower elevation range sites throughout the Bald Mountain and Callaghan HMAs. 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**

Available resources are not adequate to support a healthy wild horse population during the coming winter due to continuing drought conditions and overpopulation of wild horses. Conditions are such that widespread decline of wild horse body condition followed by suffering, and death is expected unless the area can be gathered as soon as possible to remove excess wild horses. The magnitude of the emergency will worsen with the depth of snow that falls on the winter range.

Gather alternatives analyzed in the Environmental Assessment completed for this gather include: gather with or without fertility control, modification of sex ratios and no action. The option of implementing a selective removal or gate cut gather has also been analyzed in the Interdisciplinary Team Evaluation of the Callaghan Complex, prepared by the Mount Lewis Field Office. (A gate cut gather was not analyzed in the EA)

*Selective Removal:* Capture 1740 (95%), remove 1,480, and return 260 post-gather. Of these, about 130 would be mares treated with PZP-22. Estimated Gather Cost: $567,000.

*~~Selective Removal:~~* ~~Capture 1,550 (85%), remove 1,480, and return 70-75 post-gather (studs). Estimated Gather Cost: XXXXXXXXXXX.~~ Susie this option is not practical. 85% capture rate would not allow us to even get to AML on Callaghan HMA. We will be dealing with three HMAs, and two sides of the Callaghan HMA. This option would have us releasing about 23 studs per HMA. I don’t believe that will buy us anything. To release 60% studs, we need to conduct a selective removal gather and attempt to capture 95% of the population. A gate cut equates to about 79% captured, which isn’t much different from your selective removal at 85%. With a winter gather, and the existing concentrations of wild horses, there will be no problem capturing 95% of the horses. I plan to do a flight during the gather if necessary. The 85% capture rate is more consistent with a summer gather. We have gathered this before, I know what we are capable of doing in a winter gather, especially with Cattoor as the contractor.

*Gate Cut Removal:* Capture 1,480-1,500, and return up to 10-20 selected animals post-gather. Estimated Gather Cost: $436,183 + see below. This cost was provided in the IDT report (page 8). Without gathering the horses on USFS and Simpson Park Mountains the cost would be approx. $436,183. Add $15,100 to gather outside of HMA. This is $131,000 less than a selective removal gather, but I have run the numbers from the population model, and there will be as many as 240 more older horses shipped which will cost as much as $111,000 in LTH or as much as $350,000 in STH. With a selective removal gather we can keep the older horses shipped to a minimum, and ship as many “adoptable” horses as possible.

A gate cut removal would be less expensive in the short term, but ~~could~~ **will** result in greater numbers of older animals captured/removed which ~~could~~ **will** result in increased holding costs over the long term. The preferred option would be to complete a selective removal with PZP-22 applied to mares released post-gather; ~~however, unless at least 90% of the total population can be captured, it would be most cost-effective to implement a selective removal/adjust sex ratios to favor males.~~ 90-95% of the population will be gathered during a winter gather of this Complex. This is what we should plan for. If something happened that we were not able to gather that many, we could opt to release studs instead of do fertility control.

Susie, I think that if these options are identified in this briefing paper without the IDT report attached that there should be a brief summary of the advantages and disadvantages of selective removal verses gate cut so that the decision maker has sufficient information (besides cost) to make a decision.

**PREPARED BY**: Shawna Richardson, Wild horse and Burro Specialist

and Susie Stokke, Nevada WH&B Program Lead **DATE:** 11/20/08