

9/94

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
GATHER AND SELECTIVE REMOVAL OF WILD HORSES
FROM THE JACKSON MOUNTAINS HERD MANAGEMENT AREA

I. DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

A. Background Data

This Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to assess the environmental impacts of gathering and selectively removing wild horses in the Jackson Mountains Allotment portion of the Jackson Mountains Herd Management Area (HMA), and public lands outside the HMA but immediately adjacent to it. This EA does not assess the impacts of different methods of gathering horses. These impacts were analyzed in a programmatic EA (No. NV-020-7-24) prepared in May 1987. After the incorporation of public comments, a Record of Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact was approved on August 4, 1987 and the assessment remains valid today. That EA is on file and available for review in the Winnemucca District Office.

B. Purpose and Need

The Final Multiple Use Decision (MUD) for the Jackson Mountains Allotment established the Appropriate Management Level (AML) for wild horses within the Jackson Mountains Allotment portion of the Jackson Mountains HMA at 117 adult wild horses. It is necessary to remove approximately 220 excess wild horses from the Jackson Mountains Allotment to approach AML.

For a description of wild horse population estimates and removal numbers, reference the Jackson Mountains HMA gather plan, Appendix 1.

Bureau policy regarding removals of horses follows the guidelines set forth in the Strategic Plan for the Management of Wild Horses and Burros on Public Land (Strategic Plan). The Strategic Plan indicates that only adoptable animals may be removed from the range. In accordance with Washington Office Instruction Memorandum 93-30, dated October 23, 1992, only horses 5 years of age and younger would be removed from Herd Management Areas. All horses would be removed from public lands outside of HMAs, but only horses 9 years of age and younger would be shipped for adoption. Older horses from these areas must be returned to an HMA. Deviation from this policy is permitted only upon written approval from the Wild Horse and Burro National Program Office.

This action is in conformance with the Paradise-Denio Land Use Plan, Decision WH&B 1.4.

C. Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to remove all horses 5 years of age and younger from the Jackson Mountains Allotment in the Jackson Mountains HMA. Horses removed from the allotment would be shipped to the National Wild Horse and Burro Center at Palomino Valley for adoption. Horses 6 years of age and older from this area would be released back into the southern end of the Jackson Mountains allotment.

Due to the lack of a clearly defined HMA boundary on the ground, and the consequent difficulty of determining which horses came from outside the HMA, all horses gathered would be processed according to the 5-and-under criteria.

The number of horses to be removed under this action would be approximately 220. The number of horses to remain would be approximately 140, slightly above the AML of 117.

The proposed removal operation would be expected to begin October 3, 1994, and be completed by October 15, 1994.

Alternative I

Wild horses would be removed regardless of age, until the number removed results in a population approximately equal to AML remaining on the range. No horses would be released back into the HMA - all horses gathered would be shipped for adoption. The number of horses removed under this alternative and remaining in the allotment would be approximately the same as the proposed action.

Alternative II

Wild horses 9 years of age and younger would be removed from the Herd Management Area. Older horses would be released as in the proposed action. The number of horses removed under this alternative would be approximately 290. The number of horses remaining would be approximately 70.

Alternative III

Eighty percent of the animals in each of the 0-5 year age classes would be removed, leaving a portion of individuals in these age classes for continued herd viability and reproductive success. The number of horses removed under this alternative would be approximately 180. The number of horses remaining would be approximately 180.

Alternative IV - No Action Alternative

No wild horses would be gathered. Population control would be left to natural processes.

II. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

For a description of the affected environment, reference the Jackson Mountains Herd Management Area gather plan dated August 30, 1994, part II, A and B, and the Paradise-Denio Grazing EIS.

III. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Proposed Action

Direct Impacts

Gathering operations would result in temporary soil and vegetation disturbance, at the temporary facilities, from horse and vehicle activity. Access to the area by the public would be limited or prohibited during gather operations. The opportunity for wild horse viewing after the gather would be reduced due to the lesser numbers of horses. The horses would undergo stress related to being captured and handled.

The age structure of the wild horse population in the HMA would shift toward an older population, due to the removal of the younger age classes. Following the removal approximately fifty percent of the population would be 10 years of age and older. The sex ratio would be skewed to favor the males, in approximately a 55:45 ratio.

There is a possibility that the helicopter would occasionally land inside the boundary of a Wilderness Study Area (WSA) during the capture operation, but normally this would occur only in case of emergency. The only impacts occurring would be temporary ones. The landing of helicopters satisfies the non-impairment criteria and would not require the construction of heli-spots as the helicopter would be landing on unimproved sites.

Instruction Memorandums WO-89-600 and NV-89-313 require that any disturbance in a WSA be capable of reclamation the same day as the disturbance. Therefore, cross country travel would not be allowed in a WSA and trap sites would not be constructed within a WSA.

Indirect Impacts

Several indirect impacts may occur.

a. Wild Horses

The reduction in horse numbers would bring the forage demand closer to the forage production capability of the range. This would aid in achieving proper forage utilization levels and resource objectives of the Land Use Plan and allotment specific objectives.

Population dynamics of the herd may be altered after the removal of young age classes and return of older age classes to the range. Reproductive rates may decrease somewhat as a result of removal of potential breeders. Productivity in older age class mares may increase due to increased forage availability and better nutrition - more older mares would cycle and produce foals. The overall mortality rate of the herd is likely to increase, due to the greater numbers of older animals. Social structure may be affected by the change in sex ratio. An increase in the number of bachelor bands is likely, as is increased competition and fighting over females, which would result in a lower average band size and may result in higher mortality in both sexes. (Increased competition for mares results in some turmoil in the population with its resultant stress.)

The wild horse populations in several other HMAs on this District have undergone selective removals of the 0-5 age class similar to the proposed action. All herds experienced reproductive success the year following the removal, with reproductive rates varying from approximately 10 to 30 percent depending on environmental variables, such as winter weather and forage production. These preliminary data show that one selective removal of the type proposed would not harm the population. Further selective removals would require extensive analysis. The progressively aging population on the range would eventually die, and if there are no younger animals to replace them, the herd would be eliminated.

b. Vegetation, soil and watershed

Reduction of horse numbers would allow for increased efficiency in the use of the forage resource and a reduction of grazing demand. Continuing the management policies outlined in the final multiple use decision for the Jackson Mountains allotment would contribute toward an improvement in ecological condition and associated benefits of improved watershed condition and improved water quality through the reduction of the sediment and salt loads in the surface runoff.

c. Wildlife and Livestock

The proposed action would result in an increase in quantity and quality of forage available to livestock and wildlife.

d. Cultural Resources and Threatened and Endangered Species

An inventory for cultural resources and T&E and sensitive species would be conducted prior to any surface disturbance activity. Any resources located would be avoided.

e. Paleontological Resources

An ancient mammoth archeological site is located in the northwest corner of the Jackson Mountains Allotment. A field party of archeologists will be living and working at the site during the summer of 1994.

Wild horses may be found near the site. By the time of the gather in October, the field party will have completed their work, covered the excavations, and left the site. Any impacts occurring would be minor and would consist of trampling of the soil and vegetation by horses. The paleontological resources would not be directly affected.

Ancient invertebrate fossils have been found in the Red Butte area. There should be no impacts to them from the gather operation.

f. Wilderness

The Black Rock Desert and North and South Jackson Mountains WSAs would be affected by the proposed gather. Implementation of the proposed action would result in improved ecological condition with associated watershed and soil benefits.

There would be impacts to solitude in the WSAs during the gather due to helicopter noise. These impacts would be temporary and would cease when the gather is completed.

g. Mitigating Measures and Residual Impacts

The following mitigating measures would be a part of the proposed action:

1. Cultural resource and T&E inventories would be conducted prior to setting up capture and holding facilities. Any resources identified would be avoided.
2. No surface disturbing activities are anticipated. Unanticipated surface disturbing activities would

be approved only after cultural and T&E clearance. Under no circumstances would they occur inside a WSA.

3. All phases of the gather and processing operation would be carried out according to Bureau policy with the intent of conducting as safe and humane an operation as possible.
4. Any actions taking place within a Wilderness Study Area would be in compliance with the Bureau's Interim Management Policy for lands under wilderness review.
5. Wild horse numbers and behavior would be monitored following the removal. A fixed wing aircraft flight would be scheduled one week after the animals are returned to the HMA and at other times as needed for data collection. Horse behavior would also be monitored from the ground at least monthly when possible. From ground and aerial observations, the following data would be collected and analyzed: average band size, distribution, production, location of the relocated horses; and reproductive and survival rates. Horses returned to the HMA would be freeze marked to assist in monitoring.

No Impacts

The following critical elements would not be affected: Visual Resources, Air Quality, ACEC, Farmlands, Floodplains, Native American Religious Concerns, Solid or Hazardous Wastes, Wild and Scenic Rivers, Water Quality, and Wetlands/Riparian Zones.

Alternative I

This alternative would have the same direct and indirect impacts, caused by the gather operation itself, as the proposed action. No direct or indirect impacts to the wild horse population would occur, as a selective removal would not take place.

Alternative II

Direct Impacts

This alternative would have the same direct impacts as the proposed action.

Indirect Impacts

This alternative would have the same indirect impacts as the proposed action. In addition, the impacts associated with removal of younger

age classes on a wild horse herd would be exacerbated due to the greater numbers of animals removed.

Alternative III

Direct Impacts

This alternative would have the same direct impacts as the proposed action.

Indirect Impacts

This alternative would have the same indirect impacts as the proposed action. In addition, the impacts associated with removal of younger age classes on a wild horse herd would be lessened due to the fewer numbers of animals removed. The population would not be reduced to a level consistent with the Jackson Mountains allotment evaluation.

Alternative IV

Wild horse populations would continue to increase. The Appropriate Management Level would continue to be exceeded. Preferred forage species would continue to be over utilized resulting in decreases in vegetation densities, vigor, reproduction, productivity and available forage. At some point in time, extensive death loss would result from overpopulation. Wildlife population levels would likely decline.

Decision Record
Gather and Selective Removal of Wild Horses
from the Jackson Mountains Herd Management Area

I. Proposed Action and Alternatives

- A. Proposed Action - The proposed action is to remove approximately 220 wild horses, aged 5 years and younger, from the Jackson Mountains Allotment within the Jackson Mountains HMA. Older horses would be released back into the HMA.
- B. Alternative I - Horses would be removed from the same areas as in the proposed action, but no selective removal of younger age classes would take place. Approximately 220 horses would be removed.
- C. Alternative II - Horses would be removed from the same areas as in the proposed action. Horses 9 years of age and younger would be removed from the HMA. Approximately 290 horses would be removed.
- D. Alternative III - Horses would be removed from the same areas as in the proposed action. Some horses aged 5 years and younger would remain on the range. Approximately 180 horses would be removed.
- E. Alternative IV - No Action Alternative. No wild horses would be gathered. Population control would be left to natural processes.

II. Decision and Rationale

The decision is to adopt the proposed action. Alternatives I and II are rejected as there is no compelling reason to deviate from established policy. Alternative III is rejected as this action would leave on the range approximately 60 horses in excess of AML. Alternative IV is rejected as this action is not consistent with the Land Use Plan and Jackson Mountains Allotment Multiple Use Decision.

III. Mitigation, Monitoring and Compliance

The following mitigating measures will be a part of the proposed action:

1. Cultural resource and T&E and sensitive species inventories will be conducted prior to setting up gathering and holding facilities. Any resources identified would be avoided.
2. No surface disturbing activities are anticipated. Unanticipated surface disturbing actions will be approved only after cultural and T&E/sensitive species clearance.
3. All phases of the gather, capture and processing operation will be carried out according to Bureau policy with the intent of conducting as safe and humane an operation as possible.

4. All actions taking place within a Wilderness Study Area would be in compliance with the Bureau's Interim Management Policy for lands under wilderness review.

5. Horse numbers and behavior will be monitored from the air and ground following the removal.

IV. Conclusion

The proposed action is in conformance with the Paradise-Denio Land Use Plan. Based on the EA, and in accordance with section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act, no significant environmental impacts will result and an EIS in addition to this EA is not required.

Bob Hopper, Acting Area Mgr

8/30/44

Area Manager, Paradise-Denio Resource Area

Date