



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Winnemucca District Office
705 East 4th Street
Winnemucca, Nevada 89445

IN REPLY REFER TO:

4700
(NV-240)

August 30, 1994

Dear Interested Party:

Enclosed are the final capture plans and environmental assessments for the removal of wild horses within and adjacent to the **Jackson Mountains** and Snowstorm Mountains Herd Management Areas (HMA). These HMAs are administered by the Paradise-Denio Resource Area of the Winnemucca District. The purpose of the removal is to reduce the population of wild horses within the HMAs to the appropriate management level established during the evaluation of the Jackson Mountains and Bullhead grazing allotments. The gathers are scheduled to take place between October 1 and October 31, 1994.

The action is in conformance with the Paradise-Denio MFPIII decision WH&B 1.1 in which wild horse and burro numbers are to be established by adequate and supportable resource data.

In response to comments received, the following changes have been made to the draft environmental assessments:

- 1) A section on Paleontological Resources was added to the Jackson Mountains EA.
- 2) The Wilderness sections were revised to indicate that cross country travel would not be allowed in WSAs, and trap sites would not be constructed within WSAs.

The proposed gathering will be conducted in the area shown on the enclosed map and as described below:

<u>Herd Management Area Name</u>	<u>Environmental Analysis Record Number</u>	<u>Reason for Gathering</u>	<u>Approximate number to be removed</u>	<u>Approximate number to remain</u>
Jackson Mountains	NV-020-04-28	Reduce the population	220	140
Snowstorm Mountains	NV-020-04-29	to AML	210	110

If you have any questions regarding the removal plan, contact Dave Stockdale at (702) 623-1500.

Sincerely yours,

Bob Hopper
Acting Area Manager

Paradise-Denio Resource Area

Enclosures

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Winnemucca District Office

Paradise-Denio Resource Area

Snowstorm Mountains HMA

Wild Horse Removal Plan

1994

Snowstorm Mountains HMA
Wild Horse Removal Plan

I. INTRODUCTION

The intent of this removal plan is to outline the methods and procedures to be used in removing approximately 210 wild horses from the Snowstorm Mountains Herd Management Area (HMA), and public lands outside the HMA but immediately adjacent to it. The proposed action would reduce the horse population of the HMA to a number within the AML range established in the Bullhead Allotment Final Multiple Use Decision (MUD) dated August 25, 1994. The proposed removal operation is scheduled to begin on October 16, 1994 and to be completed by October 31, 1994.

II. GENERAL AREA DESCRIPTION - BACKGROUND DATA

A. Location

The geographical center of the Snowstorm Mountains HMA is approximately 50 miles northeast of Winnemucca, Nevada. The area is bordered on the west by the Osgood Mountains, on the east by the Elko BLM District, on the north by the South Fork of the Little Humboldt River, and on the south by Kelly Creek. The elevation ranges from 4500 feet at the Little Humboldt River to 7738 feet at Snowstorm Mountain.

The HMA is administered by the Paradise-Denio Resource Area (RA). The eastern portion of the HMA lies within the Elko BLM District; however all renewable resources in the area are administered by the Winnemucca District. The HMA is approximately 145,538 acres in area: 133,138 acres (91%) public land and 12,400 acres (9%) private land.

The HMA includes habitat for wild horses, domestic livestock, chukar, sage grouse, deer, antelope, coyotes, and various species of birds, rodents and reptiles. Wildlife and wild horses inhabit the HMA year-round. Domestic livestock use the area in spring and summer.

One Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (Little Humboldt River, NV-010-132) is located within the Snowstorm HMA. A WSA designation restricts the choices for suitable trap sites and may place constraints on removal operations.

B. Vegetation

The area's vegetative composition is almost entirely the sagebrush-grass types typical of the cold desert and Great Basin. Low sagebrush (Artemisia arbuscula) and big sagebrush (A. tridentata) predominate throughout the greatest portion of the areas. Other plant species include cheatgrass (Bromus tectorum), Idaho fescue (Festuca idahoensis), needlegrass (Stipa spp.), Indian ricegrass (Oryzopsis

hymenoides), bluebunch wheatgrass (Agropyron spicatum), squirreltail (Sitanion hystrix), bluegrass (Poa spp.), shadscale (Atriplex confertifolia), spiny hopsage (Grayia spinosa), green rabbitbrush (Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus), grey rabbitbrush (C. nauseosus), bud sagebrush (A. spinescens) and winterfat (Eurotia lanata).

C. Justification

The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195) as amended, Section 3(b)(1)," states that the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture shall "determine appropriate management levels of wild free-roaming horses and burros on areas of public lands; and determine whether appropriate management levels should be achieved by the removal or destruction of excess animals, or other options (such as sterilization or natural controls on population levels)." Section 3(b)(2) states, "that if an overpopulation exists on a given area of the public lands and that action is necessary to remove excess animals, he shall immediately remove excess animals from the range so as to achieve appropriate management levels. Such action shall be taken, until all excess animals have been removed so as to restore a thriving natural ecological balance to the range, and protect the range from the deterioration associated with overpopulation."

The 1994 Bullhead Allotment Final Multiple Use Decision established the AML for the HMA as 140 adult wild horses. At this AML all forage consuming herbivores will be in a thriving natural ecological balance.

D. Reference to Environmental Assessment (EA)

An Environmental Assessment (No. NV-020-04-29) has been prepared addressing impacts of this gather and selective removal.

A Programmatic EA (No. NV-020-7-24) analyzing the environmental consequences and mitigating measures for the use of helicopters during gather operations was prepared and distributed for public comment 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.

A Plan Conformance Record for the Bullhead Allotment evaluation was completed and finalized on December 14, 1993.

These documents are available for review at the Winnemucca District Office.

E. Population and Removal Data

The following table shows the most current wild horse population estimates for the capture area.

<u>Capture Area</u>	<u>AML</u>	<u>Population Estimate</u>	<u>Estimated Post-removal Population</u>
Bullhead Allotment	140	320	110

For a derivation of these estimates, see Appendix 1.

An aerial census will be conducted immediately prior to gather to determine the exact number of horses in the area.

As identified in the Strategic Plan for management of wild horses, the primary emphasis will be to remove animals that are five years old and younger.

Captured horses from the HMA five and younger will be shipped to the Palomino Valley Corrals. Wild horses from the HMA that are six years of age or older will be released back into the herd management area.

All animals to be released back into the HMA (except foals) will be freeze-marked with a four-inch numerical mark, to assist with data collection on longevity, fertility, and movement patterns. Blood sampling for collection of genetic baseline data will be conducted on approximately 10% of the captured animals.

III. Methods For Removal And Safety

The methods employed during this capture operation will be herding animals with a helicopter to a trap built with portable panels, or herding animals with a helicopter to ropers. The Bureau of Land Management will contract with a private party for this operation. The following stipulations and procedures will be followed during the contract to ensure the welfare, safety and humane treatment of the wild horses.

A. Trapping and Care of Animals

1. All capture attempts will be accomplished by the utilization of a helicopter. A minimum of one saddle horse shall be immediately available at the trap site to accomplish roping if necessary. Roping will be done only when necessary and only with prior approval by a BLM authorized officer. Under no circumstances shall animals be tied down for more than one hour.

2. The helicopter shall be used in such a manner that bands will remain together. Foals shall not be left behind. The project helicopter actions may occasionally be observed by a Government controlled helicopter. All actions of the Government helicopter will be coordinated with the Contractor to prevent interference with the project helicopter and contract operations.

In the event an additional helicopter is not available to observe the project helicopter, other methods will be utilized to observe the removal operations such as using observers on horseback, in vehicles and/or placing stationary observers in strategic locations.

Capture operations shall be monitored to ensure foals are not orphaned and left on the range. It will be standard practice to check for wet mares without foals or foals coming into the trap without a mare. Field personnel should provide additional on-the-ground monitoring of capture operations where possible. Additional personnel may be requested through the National Program Office (NPO) to assist with capture operations during periods when young foals are expected. If it appears that foals are being separated during the capture operations and ground monitoring will not provide adequate information to develop a solution, a monitoring helicopter may be used to determine the cause of the separations and to assist in reaching a resolution to the situation. The health and well being of the captured animals are paramount and responsibility for meeting this objective lies with the district office and COR.

3. The rate of movement and distance that animals travel shall not exceed limitations set by a BLM employee who will consider terrain, physical barriers, weather, condition of the animals and other factors.

Temperature limitations are 0°F as a minimum and 95°F as a maximum.

The terrain in the removal areas varies from flat valley bottoms to mountainous, and the animals may be located at all elevations (ranging from 4500 feet to 7700 feet) during the time the gathering is scheduled.

Experience gained from past removals in this area indicates the proposed action may cause some stress to the animals. It will be difficult to remove animals from these areas without some concern for the welfare of the animals due to the following reasons.

- a. Excessively dusty conditions may occur in the capture area. Animals may suffer from dust pneumonia.

Prior to any gathering operation, BLM will provide for a pre-capture evaluation of existing conditions in the gather areas. The evaluation will include animal condition, prevailing temperatures, soil conditions, topography, road conditions, location of fences and other physical barriers, and animal distribution in relation to potential trap locations. The evaluation will also arrive at a conclusion as to whether the level of activity is likely to cause undue stress to the animals, and whether such stress would be acceptable or whether a delay in the capture activity is warranted. If it is determined that the capture efforts necessitate the services of a veterinarian, one will be obtained before the capture will proceed.

The Contractor will be provided with a topographic map of the removal area which shows acceptable trap locations and existing fences and/or physical barriers prior to any gathering operations.

The Contractor will also be appraised of the above conditions and will be given direction regarding the capture and handling of animals to ensure their health and welfare is protected.

4. It is estimated that a minimum of one trap site will be required in each capture area to accomplish the work. All trap locations and holding facilities must be approved by a BLM employee prior to construction. The Contractor may also be required to change or move trap locations as determined by the BLM. All traps and holding facilities not located on public land must have prior written approval of the landowner.

Each general site will be selected by a BLM employee after determining the habits of the animals and observing the topography of the area. Site specific locations may be selected by the Contractor with the BLM's approval within this general preselected area. Trap sites will be located to cause as little injury and stress to the animals and as little damage to the natural resources of the area as possible. Sites will be located on or near existing roads and will receive cultural, and threatened/endangered plant and animal clearances prior to construction. Additional trap sites may be required, as determined by the BLM, to relieve stress caused by certain conditions at the time of the gather (i.e. dust, rocky terrain, temperatures, etc.).

Due to the many variables affecting the distribution of animals such as weather, health and condition, and time of year, it is not possible to identify specific locations at this time. They will be determined at the time of the removal operation.

5. All traps, wings, and holding facilities shall be constructed, maintained and operated to handle the animals in a safe and humane manner and be in accordance with the following:
 - a. Traps and holding facilities shall be constructed of portable panels, the top of which shall not be less than 72 inches high, and the bottom rail of which shall not be more than 12 inches from the ground level. All traps and holding facilities shall be oval or round in design.
 - b. All loading chute sides shall be fully covered with plywood without holes or separation of plies, or like material. The loading chute shall also be a minimum of 6 feet high.
 - c. All runways shall be a minimum of 30 feet long and a minimum of 6 feet high, and shall be covered with plywood without holes or separation of plies, or like material a minimum of 1 foot to 6 feet above ground.
 - d. Wings shall not be constructed out of barbed wire or other material injurious to animals and must be approved by a BLM employee.
 - e. All crowding pens, including the gates leading to the runways, shall be covered with a material which prevents the animals from seeing out (plywood without holes or separation of plies, burlap, jute, etc.) and shall be covered a minimum of 2 feet to 6 feet above ground level. Eight linear feet of this material shall be capable of being removed or let down to provide a viewing window for brand inspection.
 - f. All pens and runways used for the movement and handling of shall be connected with hinged self-locking gates.
6. No fence modifications will be made without authorization from the BLM. The Contractor shall be responsible for restoration of any fence modifications which he has made.

If the route the Contractor proposes to herd animals passes through a fence, the Contractor shall be required to roll up the fence material and pull up the posts to provide at least a 50 yard gap. The standing fence on each side of the gap will be well flagged or covered with jute or like material for a distance of 50 yards from the gap on each side.

7. When excessively muddy conditions occur within or adjacent to the trap or holding facility, the Contractor shall be required to scatter wood shavings or straw to alleviate the problem.

When excessively dusty conditions occur within or adjacent to

the trap or holding facility, the Contractor shall be required to water down the area to alleviate the problem.

8. Alternate pens within the holding facility shall be furnished by the Contractor to separate animals with small foals, sick and injured animals, and estray animals from the other animals. Animals shall be sorted as to age, number, size, temperament, sex, and condition when in the holding facility so as to minimize, to the extent possible, injury due to fighting and trampling.
9. Animals shall be transported to final destination from temporary holding facilities within 24 hours after capture unless prior approval is granted by the BLM for unusual circumstances. Animals shall not be held in traps and/or temporary holding facilities on days when there is no work being conducted except as specified by the BLM. The Contractor shall schedule to arrive at the final destination between 6:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.. No shipments shall be scheduled to arrive at final destination on Sundays or Federal holidays. Animals shall not be allowed to remain standing in trucks while not in transport for a combined period of greater than 3 hours.
10. The Contractor shall provide animals held in the traps and/or holding facilities with a continuous supply of fresh clean water at a minimum rate of 10 gallons per animal per day. Animals held for 10 hours or more in the traps or holding facilities shall be provided good quality hay at the rate of not less than two pounds of hay per 100 pounds of estimated body weight per day.

Separate water troughs shall be provided at each pen where animals are being held. Water troughs shall be constructed of such material (e.g. rubber, rubber over metal) so as to avoid injury to animals.

11. It is the responsibility of the contractor to provide security to prevent loss, injury or death of captured animals until delivery to final destination.
12. The Contractor shall restrain sick or injured animals if treatment by the Government is necessary. The BLM will determine if injured animals must be destroyed and provide for destruction of such animals. The Contractor may be required to dispose of the carcasses as directed by the BLM.

Any severely injured or seriously sick animal shall be destroyed in accordance with 43 CFR Subpart 4730.1. Animals shall be destroyed only when a definite act of mercy is needed to alleviate pain and suffering. A BLM employee will have the primary responsibility for determining when an animal will be destroyed and will perform the actual destruction. When a BLM

employee is unsure as to the severity of an injury or sickness, a veterinarian will be called to make a diagnosis and final determination. Destruction shall be done in the most humane method available. A veterinarian can be called, if necessary, to care for any injured animal.

The carcasses of the animals which die or must be destroyed as a result of any infectious, contagious, or parasitic disease will be disposed of by burial to a depth of at least 3 feet.

The carcasses of the animals which must be destroyed as a result of age, injury, lameness, or noncontagious disease or illness will be disposed of by removing them from the capture site or holding corral and placing them in an inconspicuous location to minimize the visual impacts. Carcasses will not be placed in drainages regardless of drainage size or downstream destination.

13. Branded or privately owned animals whose owners are known will be impounded by BLM, and if not redeemed by payment of trespass and capture fees, will be sold at public auction. If owners are not known, the private animals will be turned over to the State for processing under Nevada estray laws.
14. Selecting pairs of mares and foals to be released back to the range as opposed to those to be shipped to PVC should consider the selective removal and the gather plan and/or herd management area plan objectives.

The following criteria shall be used to determine which animals will be returned to the range or sent to PVC:

- a. Mares older than the age group to be removed should be paired with their foals and returned to the range.
- b. When mares older than the age group to be removed will not pair with their foals, the foals should be sent to PVC and the mares returned to the range.
- c. When mares older than the targeted age group to be removed will accept their foals, but either the mare or the foal or both are in poor physical condition and their survival on the range is questionable, the animals should be held on site until healthy. If at the termination of the gather it still appears that the animal's survival is questionable, they should then be sent to PVC.
- d. When mares within the targeted age group to be removed are captured and will accept her foal, the pair should be sent to PVC.

- e. When mares within the age group to be removed are captured and will not accept the foal, both the mare and the foal should be sent to PVC.
15. When holding the animals at the capture site, every attempt will be made to pair animals at the trap site and ensure they remain paired. Although it is standard practice for the contractor to construct separate pens for holding pairs, should the COR determine it is necessary to construct special facilities beyond the contractor's capability additional portable panels are available at several districts and at PVC. It is recommended that the pen used to hold pairs be separated from the stallion pens by as great a distance as possible. It may be prudent to consider a satellite facility for the pairs removed from the main holding facility, yet within convenient access for feeding, watering, security, and observation.
16. When releasing animals back into the HMA, every effort should be made to avoid releasing all of the pairs at once so as to avoid a herd stampede mentality. The pairs should be released slowly, preferably a pair at a time and the animals allowed to fully clear the area around the gather site before releasing the remaining mares and stallions. The order of animal release should be adjusted to reflect the specific characteristics of each capture site and previous experience releasing animals from that site. Even with these precautions, there may be instances where foals are separated. Should some of these foals return to the trap site or be observed alone, they should be recaptured and sent to PVC.
17. Following release from the trap site, the area surrounding the trap will be monitored to determine the success of the releases prior to the contractor moving to another trap site or termination of the task order. The method of monitoring is dependent on the terrain in which the gather is being conducted and the trap site location. Monitoring should emphasize ground observation techniques and only be necessary within the immediate trap site area. In situations when ground observation is impractical due to terrain or vegetative cover, a monitoring helicopter may be employed.

B. Motorized Equipment

1. All motorized equipment employed in the transportation of captured animals shall be in compliance with appropriate State and Federal laws and regulations applicable to the humane transportation of animals.
2. Vehicles shall be in good repair, of adequate rated capacity, and operated so as to ensure that captured animals are transported without undue risk or injury.

3. Only stock trailers with a covered top shall be allowed for transporting animals from traps to temporary holding facilities. Only bobtail trucks, stock trailers, or single deck trucks shall be used to haul animals from temporary holding facilities to final destination. Sides or stock racks of transporting vehicles shall be a minimum height of 6 feet 6 inches from vehicle floor. Single deck trucks with trailers 40 feet or longer shall have two partition gates providing three compartments within the trailer to separate animals. Trailers less than 40 feet shall have at least one partition gate providing two compartments within the trailer to separate animals. The compartments shall be of equal size plus or minus 10 percent. Each partition shall be a minimum of 6 feet high and shall have a minimum 5 foot wide swinging gate. The use of double deck trailers is unacceptable and shall not be allowed.

4. All vehicles used to transport animals to the final destination shall be equipped with at least one door at the rear end of the vehicle, which is capable of sliding either horizontally or vertically. The rear door must be capable of opening the full width of the trailer. All panels facing the inside of all trailers must be free of sharp edges or holes that could cause injury to the animals. The material facing the inside of the trailer must be strong enough, so that the animals cannot push their hooves through the sides.

The Contractor will not be allowed to begin work on the contract until all vehicles and equipment are in compliance with these stipulations.

5. Floors of vehicles and the loading chute shall be covered and maintained with wood shavings to prevent the animals from slipping.

The adequacy of this material will be confirmed prior to every load by a BLM employee.

6. Animals to be loaded and transported in any vehicle shall be as directed by a BLM employee and may include limitations on numbers according to age, size, temperament and animal condition. The following minimum linear feet per animal shall be allowed per standard 8 foot wide stock trailer/truck:

1.40 linear foot per adult horse (11 square feet per adult horse)

.75 linear foot per horse foal (6 square feet per horse foal)

The BLM employee supervising the loading of the animals to be transported from the trap to the temporary holding corral will

require separation of small foals and/or weak animals from the rest should he/she feel that they may be injured during the trip. He/she will consider the distance and condition of the road in making this determination. Animals shipped from the temporary holding corral to the BLM facility will be separated by sex and age class (including small yearlings). Further separation may be required should condition of the animals warrant.

The BLM employee supervising the loading will exercise his/her authority to off load horses should he/she feel there are too many animals on the vehicle.

7. The BLM shall consider the condition of the animals, weather conditions, type of vehicles, distance to be transported, or other factors when planning for the movement of captured animals. The BLM shall provide for any brand and/or inspection services required for the captured animals. It is currently planned to ship all animals to the Palomino Valley facility. Communication lines have been established with the Palomino Valley personnel involved in off-loading the animals, to receive feedback on how the animals arrive. Should problems arise, gathering methods, shipping methods and/or separation of the animals will be changed in an attempt to alleviate the problems.
8. If a BLM employee determines that road conditions are such that animals could be endangered during transportation, the Contractor will be instructed to adjust speed. The maximum distance over which animals may have to be transported on dirt roads is approximately 60 miles per load.

In general, roads in the capture areas are in fair to good condition. If a problem develops, speed restrictions shall be set or alternate routes used.

Periodic checks by BLM employees will be made as the animals are transported along dirt roads. If speed restrictions are in effect, then BLM employees will, at times, follow and/or time trips to ensure compliance.

C. Helicopter, Pilot and Communications

1. The Contractor must operate in compliance with Federal Aviation Regulations, Part 91. Pilots provided by the Contractor shall comply with the Contractors Federal Aviation Certificates, applicable regulations of the State of Nevada and shall follow what are recognized as safe flying practices.
2. When refueling, the helicopter shall remain a distance of at least 1,000 feet or more from animals, vehicles (other than the fuel truck), and personnel not involved in refueling.

3. The BLM shall have the means to communicate with the Contractor's pilot and be able to direct the use of the gather helicopter at all times. If communications cannot be established, the Government will take steps as necessary to protect the welfare of the animals.
4. The proper operation, service and maintenance of all Contractor furnished helicopters is the responsibility of the Contractor. The BLM reserves the right to remove from service, pilots and helicopters which, in the opinion of the BLM violate contract rules, are unsafe or otherwise unsatisfactory. In this event, the Contractor will be notified in writing to furnish replacement pilots or helicopters within 48 hours of notification. All such replacements must be approved in advance of operation by the BLM.

IV. Responsibility and Lines of Communication

The Contracting Officer's Representative, Ron Hall and Project Inspectors Dave Stockdale and Dave Boyles, from the Winnemucca District, have the direct responsibility to ensure the Contractor's compliance with the contract stipulations. However, the Paradise-Denio Area Manager and the Winnemucca District Manager will take an active role to ensure that appropriate lines of communication are established between the field, District, State, and Palomino offices. All employees involved in the gathering operations will keep the best interests of the animals at the forefront at all times.

All publicity, formal public contact and inquiries will be handled through the Paradise-Denio Area Manager. This individual will be the primary contact and will coordinate the contact with the Palomino Valley Corrals to ensure animals are being transported from the capture site in a safe and humane manner and are arriving in good condition.

The contract specifications require humane treatment and care of the animals during removal operations. These specifications are designed to minimize the risk of injury and death during and after capture of the animals. The specifications will be enforced vigorously.

Should the Contractor show negligence and not perform according to contract stipulations, he will be issued written instructions, stop work orders, or defaulted.

V. Full Force and Effect

To prevent undue stress to the wild horse population and to promote progression toward the attainment of a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship, this action is placed in full force and effect (43 CFR 4770.3(c)).

VI. Signatures:

Prepared by: Carol R. Storchle Date 8/30/94
Wild Horse and Burro Specialist
Paradise-Denio Resource Area

Recommended by: Bob Stoppel Date 8/30/94
Area Manager
Paradise-Denio Resource Area

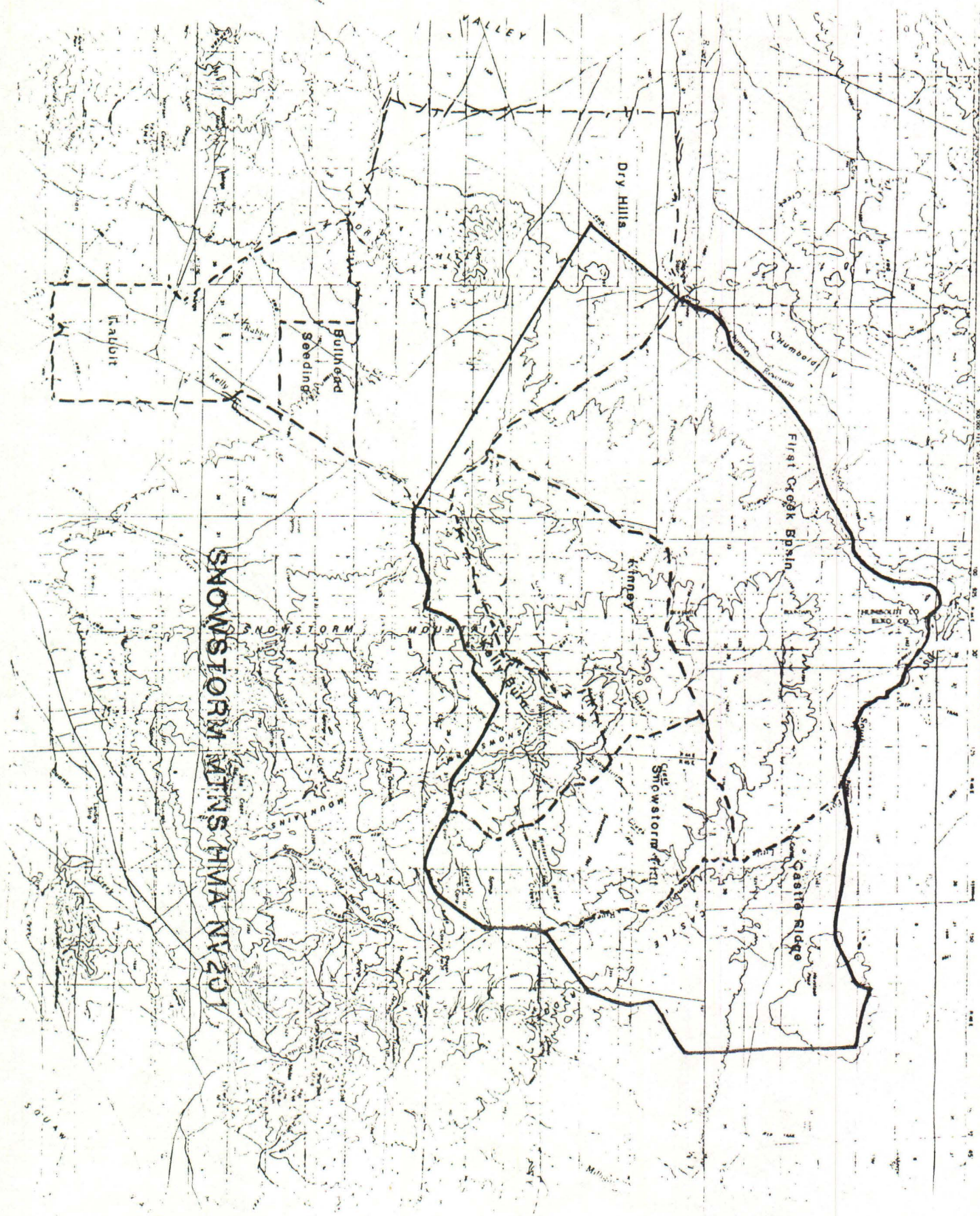
Approved by: Robert J. Neary Date 8/30/94
Winnemucca District Manager

A. Terry

Appendix 1. Determination of population estimate

An aerial census in November 1993 identified 297 horses in the Bullhead allotment (238 adults, 59 foals). Previous population data for this area showed a foal crop of approximately 20%. Assuming a 90% overwinter survival rate, $297 \times .9 = 267$ animals survived to spring 1994. Again adding 20% foals, $(267 \times .20) + 267 = 320$ animals by summer/fall 1994.

Assuming that 65% of the population is 5 years of age and younger (from other HMA removal data), $320 \times 0.65 = 208$ animals removed with 112 remaining. (These numbers are rounded off in the text of the capture plan).



SNOWSTORM MOUNTAIN NV 201

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
GATHER AND SELECTIVE REMOVAL OF WILD HORSES
FROM THE SNOWSTORM 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 Snowstorm Mountains Herd Management Area (HMA). 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 Decision Record 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 Bullhead Allotment established the Appropriate Management Level (AML) for wild horses within the Snowstorm Mountains HMA at 140 adult wild horses, to be managed within a range of 90-140 horses. It is therefore necessary to remove approximately 210 excess wild horses from the Snowstorm Mountains HMA to reach the AML range.

For a description of horse population estimates and removal numbers, reference the Snowstorm 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 will 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 will 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 Snowstorm Mountains HMA. Horses removed from the HMA would be shipped to 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 Bullhead Allotment.

Due to the lack of a clearly defined HMA boundary on the ground in the Dry Hills pasture, 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 210. The number of horses to remain in the HMA would be approximately 110, within the AML range.

The proposed removal operation would be expected to begin October 16, 1994, and be completed by October 31, 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 HMA 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 270. The number of horses remaining in the HMA would be approximately 50.

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 160. The number of horses remaining in the HMA would be approximately 160.

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 Snowstorm Mountains HMA gather plan dated August 30, 1994, part II, A and B, the Paradise-Denio Grazing EIS, and the Elko District Resource Management Plan.

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 the Little Humboldt River Wilderness Study Area (WSA) during the capture operation, but normally this would occur only due to 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 the WSA and trap sites would not be constructed within the 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 Bullhead 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 total dissolved solid 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. Wilderness

The Little Humboldt River WSA (NV-010-132) 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 WSA during the gather due to helicopter noise. These impacts would be temporary and would cease when the gather is completed.

f. 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 the 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, Wetlands/Riparian Zones, and Paleontological Resources.

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 Bullhead 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 Snowstorm Mountains Herd Management Area

I. Proposed Action and Alternatives

- A. Proposed Action - The proposed action is to remove approximately 210 wild horses, aged 5 years and younger, from the Bullhead Allotment within the Snowstorm 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 210 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 270 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 160 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 Bullhead 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 will 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 will 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

8/30/94

Area Manager, Paradise-Denio Resource Area

Date