



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Surprise Field Office
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In Reply Refer To:
1790/4700(CA-370)P

July 25, 2000

DECISION RECORD/FONSI

Environmental Assessment #CA-370-00-13

HELICOPTER CAPTURE PLAN FOR WILD HORSES IN THE HIGH ROCK, NUT MOUNTAIN, AND WALL CANYON HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS

Decision

Based on all the information available to me, it is my decision to implement the Proposed Action of the attached Environmental Assessment #CA-370-00-13. No additional mitigation measures were identified as a result of the Environmental Analysis.

Rationale

The Proposed Action, Non-Selective Removal Alternative and No Action Alternative were analyzed in Environmental Assessment #CA-370-00-13. The No Action Alternative was not chosen as it would not restore a natural thriving ecological balance. Degradation of the vegetative resource, including riparian habitats would continue and animals would continue inhabiting areas outside the established herd management area.

Due to current direction, the Non-Selective Removal Alternative is not a feasible option.

I have chosen to implement the Proposed Action because this alternative would lead to restoration of a natural thriving ecological balance, resulting in overall positive impacts to both the wild horses and their habitat.

Implementation of the Proposed Action is consistent with land use planning goals and objectives and in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon the Environmental Assessment #CA-370-00-13, I have determined that implementation of the Proposed Action of the Helicopter Gathering Plan for Wild Horses in the High Rock, Nut Mountain and Wall Canyon Herd Management Areas would not result in any significant impacts on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required according to Section 102 (2) (c) of NEPA.

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Cowhead/Massacre Management Framework Plan and would not cause any undue or unnecessary environmental degradation.



Susan T. Stokke, Surprise Field Office Manager



Date

**HELICOPTER CAPTURE PLAN
FOR WILD HORSES IN THE
WALL CANYON, NUT MOUNTAIN AND
HIGH ROCK HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS
OF THE SURPRISE RESOURCE AREA
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
NO. CA-370-00-13**

A. Purpose

The purpose of this environmental assessment is to analyze the capture technique to be used in the management of wild horses in the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain Herd Management Areas of the Surprise Field Office (see General Location Map 1). The overriding goal of management is to maintain both a healthy wild horse population and the range in a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship. This environmental assessment does not address the establishment of appropriate management levels for these herd management areas. Appropriate management levels for these HMAs were established through EA No. CA-028-93-03. No additional information has been found that indicates a need to adjust the established management levels.

Relationship to Other Environmental Documents

This EA is tiered to the Cowhead/Massacre Environmental Impact Statement, which analyzed the general ecological impacts of managing rangelands in the planning unit under a program including monitoring and adjustment of wild horses. Additionally, EA No. CA-028-93-03 was finalized in October 8, 1993, which analyzed the impacts of the establishment of appropriate management levels for wild horses in these HMAs. Ruling No. IBLA 94-163, dated July 18, 1995, affirmed the establishment of an AML and subsequent removal of excess animals from the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain HMAs. All of the above documents can be found in the BLM's Surprise Field Office in Cedarville, California.

Relationship to Statutes and Regulations

Both the Code of Federal Regulations(4700) and the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971 provide for the removal of excess wild horses.

B. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to implement the Capture Plan incorporated as part of this document. The Plan calls for the removal of wild horses to achieve appropriate management levels (AML) within the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain HMAs. It is planned to gather only in the East of Canyon Home Range of the High Rock HMA at this time. An appropriate management level for the Little High Rock Home Range has not yet been established. Gathering and removal targets are as shown below.

HMA NAME	Appropriate Management Level Range	Estimated Number to Gather	Estimated Number to Remove
Wall Canyon	15-25	150	100
Nut Mountain	30-55	100	65
High Rock (East of Canyon Home Range)	30-40	200	130
TOTALS	75-120	450	295

The removal of excess wild horses would be accomplished by the use of a helicopter herding the animals into a trap constructed of portable panels. This operation would be accomplished either by BLM employees, contract, or a combination of both. Horses that are gathered and found to be 5 years or younger will generally be placed in the regular adoption program. Horses gathered that are older than 5 years old will generally be released back to the range. In addition, it is planned to collect information on herd characteristics for each of the HMAs, including data to determine population characteristics (age, sex, color, etc.), assess herd health (pregnancy/ parasites/physical condition/etc.), and determine herd condition and trend (blood sampling).

No fertility control vaccinations will be used on these herds.

The objective is to remove wild horses to within the appropriate management level range. However, due to selective removal criteria, it is not expected that appropriate management levels will be achieved with this removal. Periodic removals approximately every three or four years will be necessary to maintain the numbers at the level identified by monitoring and to expand population information for each herd data base.

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

1. Non-Selective Removal Alternative

This alternative would be the same as the Proposed Action, except animals of all ages could be removed. Information on herd characteristics, health, age and sex structure would still be collected but not as completely as the entire herd would not be gathered. This alternative would allow achievement of AMLs..

2. No Action Alternative

The No Action alternative would result in no wild horses being captured, removed, or relocated. Appropriate management levels for the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain HMAs would not be attained. Additional herd population data would not be collected.

C. Affected Environment

The affected environment is described in the Cowhead/Massacre Land Use documents, and more specifically in EA No. CA-028-93-03, dated June 22, 1993.

The HMAs have undergone several removals since the passage of the Act. A summary of removal data during the last two gathers follows.

Wall Canyon HMA (See Map 2) — Since 1988, 106 animals have been removed from the HMA. During the last removal (conducted October 1993), 56 animals were removed from the Wall Canyon HMA. Data from this gather revealed that 62% of the animals gathered were 5 or under, which appears a fairly common ratio for herds in northeastern California/northwestern Nevada which haven't been gathered on a regular basis. Data indicates that the sex ratio for the entire herd at that time was 43% male, 57% female. The animals turned out at that time included 19 males and 28 females (40/60 ratio). It is currently estimated that there are approximately 158 wild horses plus foals born during the spring of 2000.

Nut Mountain HMA (See Map 3) — This herd was also gathered in 1988 and 1993. In 1988, a total of 70 animals were gathered with 30 being returned to the range. In 1993, 36 animals (13 males, 23 females) were gathered. This represents a population of 36% male and 64% female. Of the total number gathered, data indicates 53% were 5 years of age or younger. Of the animals returned, 33% were male and 63% were female. Current estimated population for this HMA is 104 horses plus foals born during the spring of 2000.

High Rock HMA, East of Canyon Home Range (See Map 4) — In 1988, 20 animals were removed from this Home Range. During the last removal, conducted in October 1993, a total of 67 animals were gathered with 42 being removed. Data from this gather indicated that 73 % of the entire population was under 5 years of age. Data also indicates that the entire herd at that time was 49% male, 51% female. The animals turned out at that time included 12 studs and 13 mares. It is estimated that there are currently approximately 200 head plus foals born during the spring of 2000 in the Home Range.

D. Environmental Impacts

1. Proposed Action

Impacts on Horses (Removal)

Some stress to the wild horses would be associated with the helicopter herding. All the procedures discussed in Methods of Removal of the Capture Plan (V) will be strictly adhered to thus minimizing stress and injuries. Unavoidable impacts in the form of injuries to the wild horses may occur as a result of the capture process. Based on previous gathers, the death rate is not expected to exceed 1% of the animals captured.

Managing horses in a range which can be maintained by the vegetative community with other uses would minimize the stress to individual horses associated with limited forage and space resources. Minimizing the day to day stress would be especially important to the young animals. Managing the population in a manner which maximizes the intervals between capture operations minimizes the stress and injuries associated with removals while maintaining the range in a thriving natural ecological balance.

Due to the current estimated numbers, the number of years since the last gather, and the expectation that approximately 65% of the total animals gathered will be 5 years of age or younger, it is not likely that AML will be achieved with this removal. The age-based selective removal would tend to initially result in an

older herd. The herd would be expected to return towards the normal age structure before the next removal.

All animals captured would be shipped to the Litchfield Holding Facility where they would be sorted as to sex and age. Those found to be too old for the adoption program or unadoptable for some other reason will be returned to their respective HMA as soon as practical. All adoptable animals would be prepared and made available for placement through the adoption program.

Impacts of selective removals on wild horse populations were discussed in EA-028-93-03.

Other Impacts

Managing horses to achieve a thriving natural ecological balance would have only positive impacts on horses, domestic livestock, vegetation and wildlife. Maintaining the horse population in balance with the other uses would assure the vegetation community would not be over utilized. As a result, vegetation communities would be maintained or continue to be improved rather than deteriorating from over-use. In addition, horses would have access to adequate water and space which are both requirements for a healthy population.

Under the Proposed Action, there would be a impact on air quality due to the dust from capture operations and the increase in vehicle traffic. This impact would be temporary and diminish when the capture efforts end.

Soils in the vicinity of trap sites would be churned up from trampling. Brush and herbaceous species enclosed in the traps would be trampled and possibly killed. This would be a minor, local impact.

Riparian areas within the HMA would be expected to improve due to reduced grazing pressure occurring during the hot season months.

All trap sites would have cultural and special status species clearances conducted prior to trap construction, therefore, there would be no impact to these values. Potential trap sites with cultural resources or special status species identified will not be utilized.

The project areas includes portions of the East Fort High Rock WSA (CA-020-914) and the Massacre Rim WSA (CA-020-1013) and in the long term, capture efforts will have negligible impacts to the WSAs. There will be a short term impact to solitude resulting from the increase in activity resulting from the

capture operations. This effect would be primarily due to the presence of a helicopter driving horses and vehicle traffic adjacent to the WSA.

Traps, if constructed within the WSA boundary, will be limited to areas immediately adjacent to roads or ways. Any impacts would be limited to trampling of brush inside the traps and soil disturbance associated with turning trucks around at the trap site. In the long term, improved vegetation conditions, associated with decreased grazing by wild horses on both the uplands and riparian habitats, would be a positive impact on wilderness values.

The Proposed Action would not adversely impact air quality, ACECs, recreation, farmlands, floodplains, Native American religious concerns, wastes, water quality, noxious weeds or wild and scenic rivers.

Irreversible and Irretrievable Impacts

There would be no irreversible or irretrievable impacts from implementing the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts are the impacts on the environment which result from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time.

The cumulative impacts of removing primarily younger age classes of animals over an extended period is not entirely known. If gathering was conducted on a regular basis (i.e. every 2-3 years) it could be expected that the population would shift from a "normal" age distribution to one made up of primarily older animals.

Alternatives

1. Non-Selective Removal Alternative

Impacts from implementing the Non-Selective Removal Alternative would be largely the same as for the Proposed Action. The primary differences would be age structure of the remaining herd, and required gathering numbers. If animals are removed of all age groups, the age structure for the animals left within the HMA should more closely resemble a normal age structure for the herd. This should be a positive

impact on populations. Repeated removals under this type of management scenario would not lead to an older aged population and should result in a healthier herd. Removals without regard to age would also allow the management of populations to within the established appropriate management levels. Under this alternative, fewer animals would have to be gathered and handled, reducing stress on the population as a whole. This alternative would result in overall positive impacts to the animals and their habitat.

2. **No Action Alternative**

This alternative would result in no horses being removed which would result in an increase of their numbers beyond the established AML. The animals would not undergo stress involved with the capture effort nor experience injuries or fatalities. As the population increased the horses would experience stress in searching for adequate forage, water and space. The area would not be in a state of thriving natural ecological balance and degradation of the vegetative resource, including riparian areas, would continue. AMLs would not be achieved. The BLM would be in violation of existing laws and regulations and the land use plan objectives would not be achieved. This alternative would not meet the objective of maintaining wild horses within the appropriate management level.

In the longer term, the No Action alternative would slowly result in a decrease of naturalness within the wilderness study areas, due to the increased grazing pressure from uncontrolled populations of wild horses.

The No Action alternative would not adversely impact air quality, ACECs, recreation, farmlands, floodplains, Native American religious concerns, wastes, water quality, wild and scenic rivers, or noxious weeds.

E. **Public Participation**

This Capture Plan/Environmental Assessment has been sent to the following persons, groups and government agencies in order to solicit comments. Comments received will be considered during finalization of this gather plan/environmental assessment.

Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses
Wild Horse Organized Assistance (WHOA)
Nevada Division of Wildlife
Debra Ellsworth, Redwing Horse Sanctuary
Estill Ranches
Double Horseshoe Ranch
White Pine Ranch

Wildlife Management Institute
Fort Bidwell Tribal Council
Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe
Summit Lake Paiute Tribe
Cedarville Rancheria
Winnemucca Tribal Council

A Notice of Proposed Action for activities proposed within wilderness study areas was also sent to about thirty individuals and groups on the Surprise Field Office Wilderness mailing list.

F. List of Preparers

Rob Jeffers, Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist
Barry Dopp, Rangeland Management Specialist
Roger Farschon, Ecologist
Alan Uchida, Watershed Specialist
Jerry Bonham, Range Technician

HELICOPTER CAPTURE PLAN

FOR

WILD HORSES

IN THE

NUT MOUNTAIN, HIGH ROCK &

WALL CANYON

HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS

FISCAL YEAR 2000

Bureau of Land Management
Surprise Field Office
P.O. Box 460
Cedarville, CA 96104

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Capture Plan is to outline the methods and procedures to be used in removing approximately 300 wild horses from the Wall Canyon, Nut Mountain and High Rock Herd Management Areas (CA-265, CA-266 & CA-264) of the Surprise Resource Area (See Map 1). This action would take the wild horse populations to within or near the population ranges established for each of the herd management areas. After attaining AML, the populations of wild horses would then be allowed to increase for 3 to 5 years, at which time, it is projected that the populations would be at the upper end of the established population range. At that time, the need for another removal would be determined based upon the actual wild horse populations present.

The proposed removal would begin sometime after July 1, 2000 and would take approximately three weeks to complete.

II. GENERAL AREA DESCRIPTION - BACKGROUND DATA

The Wall Canyon Herd Management Area is located approximately 40 miles east of Cedarville, California (see attached Map 2). The HMA is bordered by the BLM's Winnemucca District to the east. The HMA consists of approximately 49,000 acres.

The Nut Mountain Herd Management Area is located approximately 35 miles east of Cedarville, California (see attached Map 3). The HMA is bordered by the Wall Canyon HMA to the east, the High Rock HMA to the south, and the Bitner HMA to the north. The HMA consists of approximately 41,000 acres.

The High Rock Herd Management Area is located approximately 35 miles east of Cedarville, California (see attached Map 4). The HMA is bordered by the Wall Canyon and Nut Mountain HMAs to the north, the Fox Hog HMA to the south and the Winnemucca District to the east, the High Rock HMA to the south, and the Bitner HMA to the north. The HMA consists of approximately 115,000 acres.

These HMAs are located in the Cowhead/Massacre Planning Unit. The Environmental Impact Statement for the Cowhead/Massacre Planning Unit was completed in 1980.

Vegetation is typical of the Great Basin Community. The area generally contains scattered patches of mountain mahogany and bitterbrush with large areas of big and low sagebrush.

Proposed gathering and removal for FY 2000 will be conducted in the Nut Mountain HMA (CA-266), the Wall Canyon HMA (CA-265), and the High Rock HMA (CA-264).

In the High Rock HMA, gathering will only be conducted in the East of Canyon Home Range. An appropriate management level for the Little High Rock Home Range of the High Rock HMA has not yet been established.

Appropriate management levels for wild horses in these HMAs were established through the analysis of monitoring data, as documented in the Environmental Assessment No. CA-028-93-03, dated June 22, 1993. The determinations of appropriate management levels were also upheld in Ruling No. IBLA 94-163, dated July 18, 1995. No additional information has been found since the establishment of these AMLs that show a need to adjust them. The goal is to have wild horses be part of a thriving natural ecological balance among the multiple uses for each of the HMAs. Environmental Assessment CA-370-00-13 has been prepared to analyze impacts associated with the proposed removal.

III. JUSTIFICATION

The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195) as amended, Section 3(b)(2) states "...if an overpopulation exists on a given area of 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, in the following order and priority 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 the overpopulation."

Environmental Assessment CA-028-93-03 was completed on June 22, 1993. The Decision Record issued by the Surprise Field Manager on October 8, 1993, established the appropriate management level (AML) range for each HMA as follows:

<u>HMA Name & Number</u>	<u>AML Management Range</u>
High Rock (CA-264) East of Canyon Home Range	30-40
Nut Mountain (CA-266)	30-55
Wall Canyon (CA-265)	15-25

The above populations have been determined to be the maximum level necessary to achieve and maintain a natural thriving ecological balance in each area. These levels were upheld by IBLA 94-163, dated July 18, 1995.

The maximum number for each range is the maximum carrying capacity for wild horses determined from the monitoring data analysis. The minimum number for the range is the

approximate level of animals which would be expected to increase to the maximum range figure in three to four years.

IV. POPULATION AND REMOVAL DATA

The Wall Canyon, Nut Mountain and High Rock HMAs were last gathered in the Fall of 1993. All herds were placed under structured management at that time.

The current populations of wild horses are estimated as follows:

<u>HMA NAME</u>	<u>CURRENT POPULATION ESTIMATE*</u>
High Rock (East of Canyon Home Range)	200
Nut Mountain	104
Wall Canyon	158

* Not including foals born during 2000.

Estimates for wild horses are based on the projected average annual increase of 17%. Estimated gathering and removal for the HMAs are as follows:

HMA NAME	Appropriate Management Level Range	Estimated Number to Gather	Estimated Number to Remove*
Wall Canyon	15-25	150	100
Nut Mountain	30-55	100	65
High Rock (East of Canyon Home Range)	30-40	200	130
TOTALS	75-120	450	295

* These numbers are estimates of the animals to be removed if age based selective criteria are applied. If older aged animals are allowed to be removed, it is planned to remove enough animals to achieve appropriate management levels.

Enough animals will be released to insure that the number of wild horses falls above the established minimum population range. Any base herd horses that have died since the last structuring and removal will be replaced with animals from those gathered.

It is recognized that it may not be possible to achieve appropriate management levels by removing only horses five years and younger. The removal of older horses will only occur if they can be readily placed through adoption, put into a prison gentling program, or placed in sanctuaries.

V. METHODS OF REMOVAL

Gathering will be conducted by contract or by the Susanville District wild horse gathering crew.

Gathering of wild horses will be done by using a helicopter to herd the animals to a trap constructed of portable pipe panels. The helicopter will be used in such a manner that bands will remain together. Rate of movement and distance animals travel will be based on terrain, physical barriers, weather and condition of animals. All traps and wings will be constructed in such a manner to facilitate safe, humane capture of animals. At all times, gathering will be under direct supervision of a duly authorized employee of the Bureau of Land Management. Humane procedures prescribed by the BLM will be used in all gathering and handling operations.

The majority of the wild horses in each HMA will have to be gathered in an effort to achieve AML if only horses five years or younger are being removed. This will be done only if practical and at no time will horses be placed under undue stress during the gathering operation. The welfare and humane treatment of the animals will remain the BLM's highest priority. If older animals can be removed, it would not be necessary to conduct a complete gather.

Captured animals will be shipped to the BLM's Litchfield Wild Horse and Burro Holding Facility in straight deck trucks. Here the animals will be sorted by age and sex. The Litchfield Facility is well set up to provide for humane handling, preparation, and care of captured animals, with a minimum of stress. Animals to be released will be kept separate from the other animals and returned to their home ranges as quickly as possible. All releases will be done as necessary to insure the population of animals remain at least at the minimum levels called for in the appropriate management levels.

All publicity, formal public contact and inquiries will be handled through the Surprise Field Manager.

VI. REFERENCE TO ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Environmental Assessment No. CA-028-93-03 was prepared in June, 1993 to analyze impacts associated with establishment of current appropriate management levels. Environmental Assessment No. 370-00-13 was prepared to address impacts associated with the removal operations.

VII. PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

The Helicopter Gathering Plan and associated environmental assessment will be sent to all interested parties who have requested a copy of these documents.

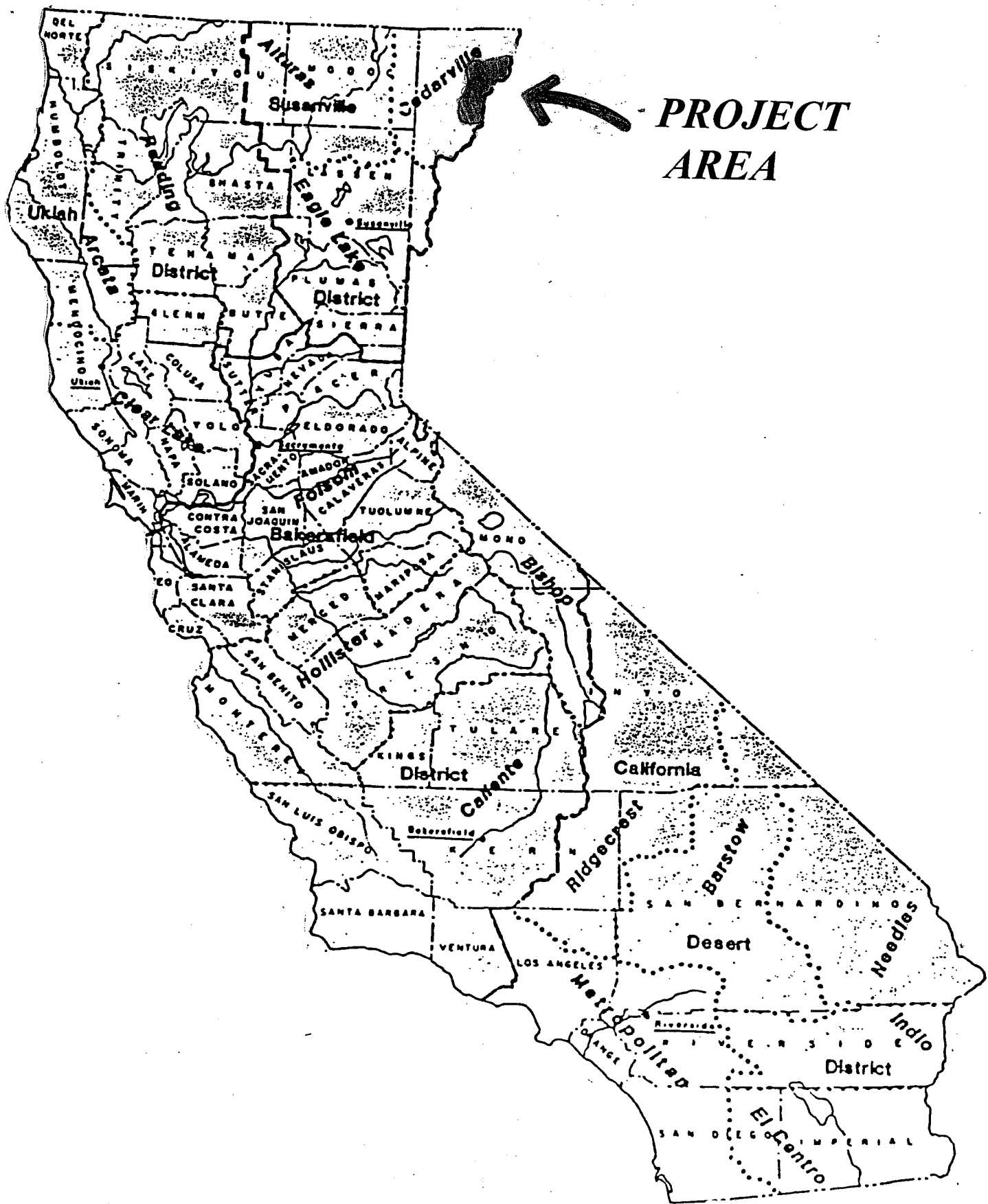
Prepared by: Rob Jeff
Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist

7/25/2000
Date

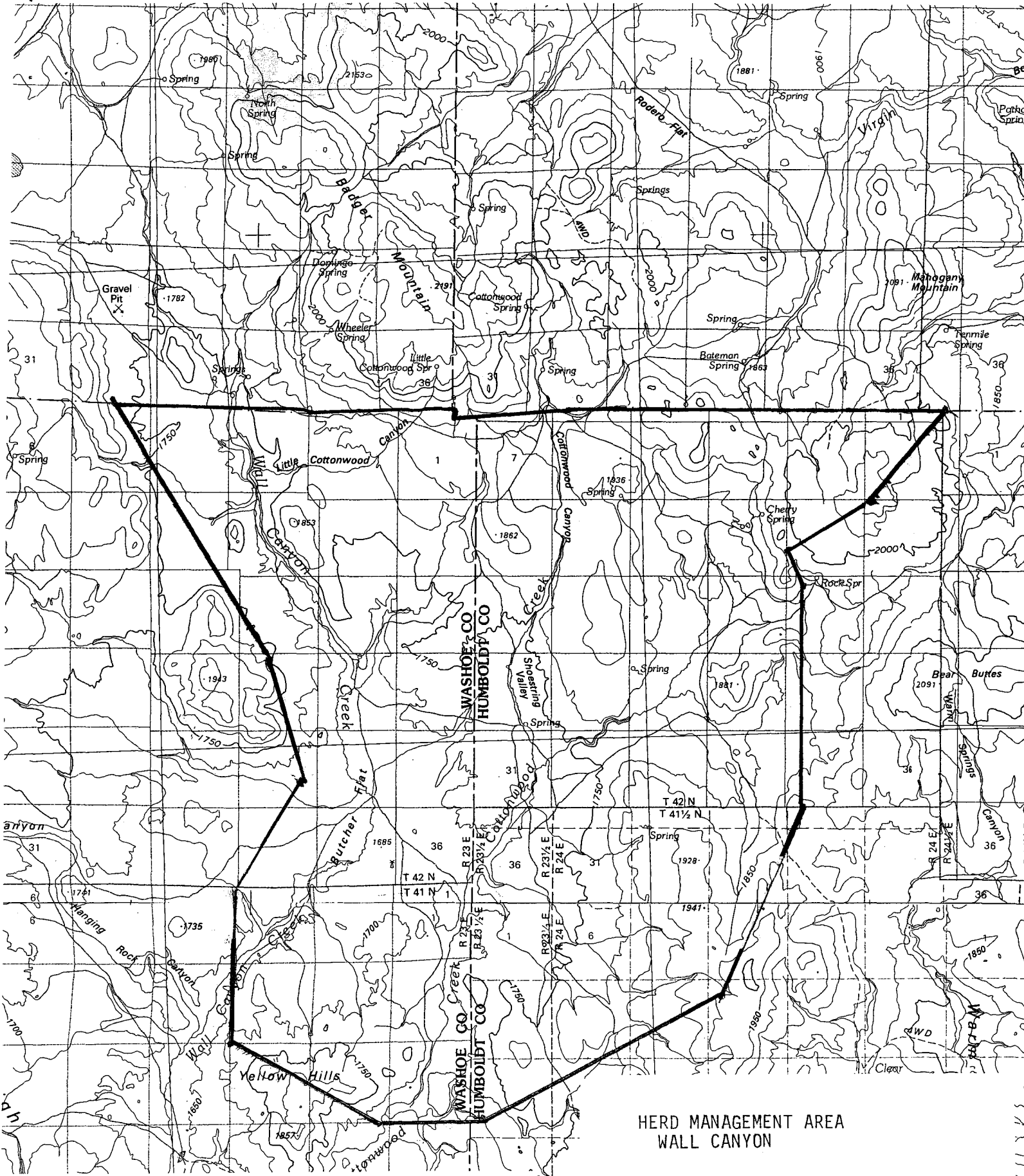
Approved by: TSusan J. Stolle
Manager, Surprise Field Office

7/25/00
Date

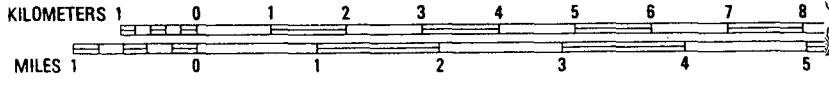
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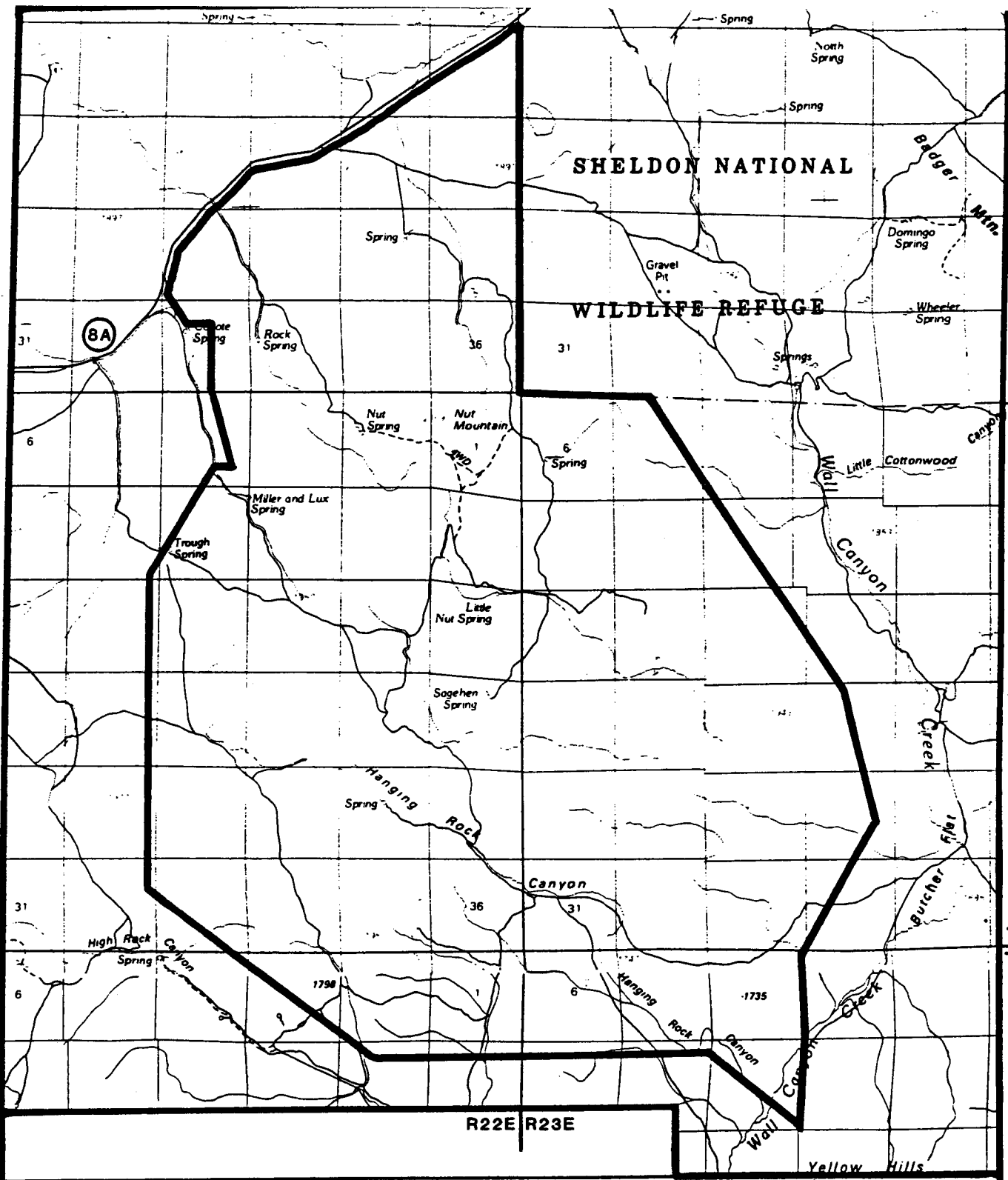


MAP 1- General Location



HERD MANAGEMENT AREA
WALL CANYON

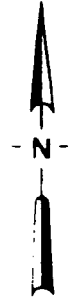


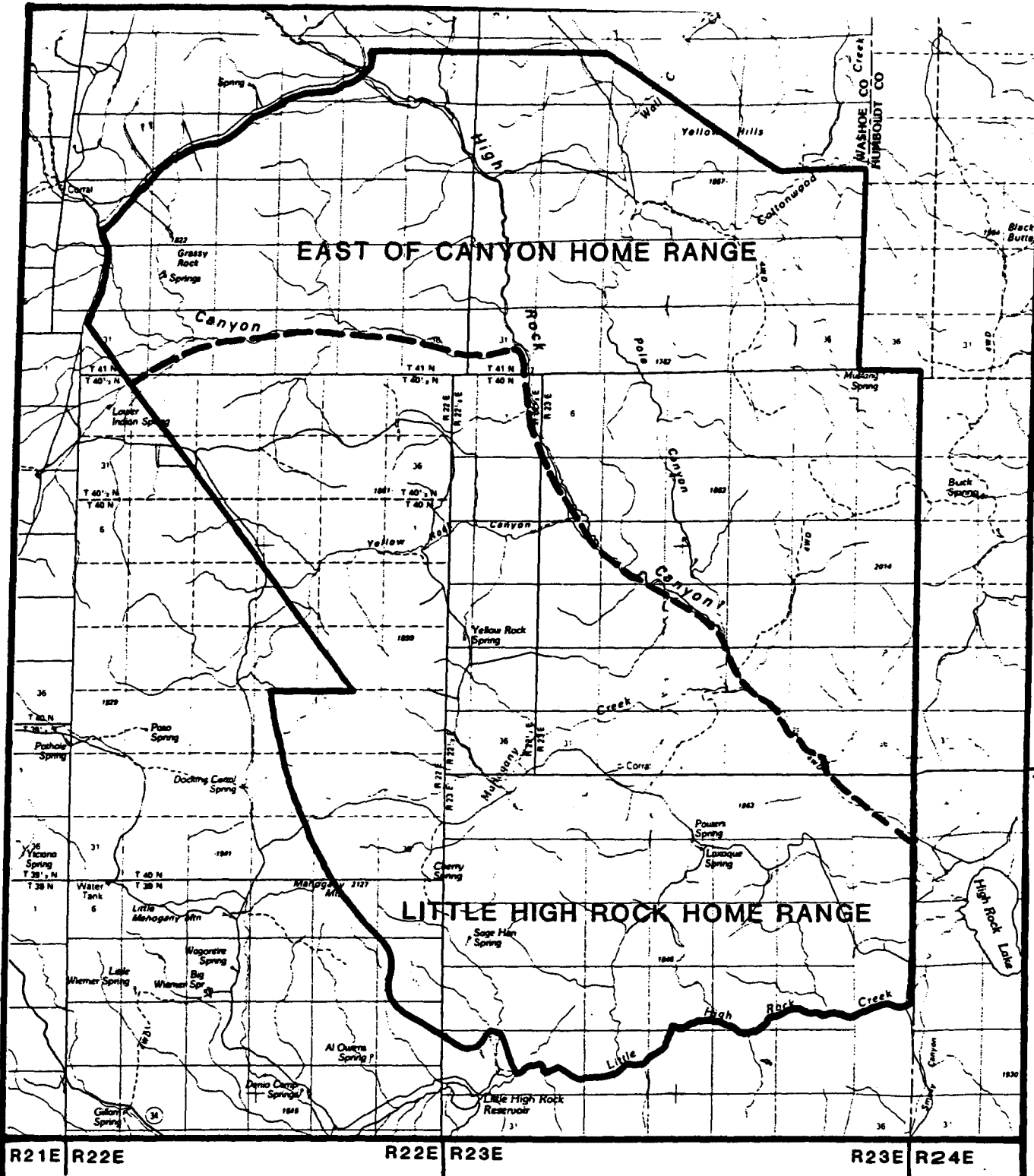


— Herd Management Area boundary



UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
CALIFORNIA STATE OFFICE
HERD MANAGEMENT AREA
NUT MOUNTAIN

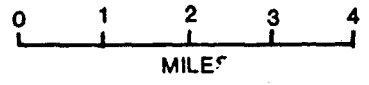
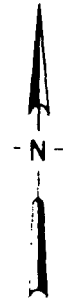




R21E R22E R22E R23E R23E R24E

————— Herd Management Area boundary

UNITED STATES
 DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
 CALIFORNIA STATE OFFICE
 HERD MANAGEMENT AREA
HIGH ROCK





DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES
COMMISSION FOR THE
PRESERVATION OF WILD HORSES

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August 17, 2000

Susan Stokke, Surprise Field Manager
BLM-Surprise Resource Area
PO Box 460
602 Cressler Street
Cedarville, CA 96104

Dear Susan,

We appreciate the opportunity to review and comment on the approved final Capture Plan/EA and Decision Record/FONSI for the Wall Canyon, Nut Mountain, and High Rock Herd Management Areas.

The appropriate management levels for these wild horse herds were determined upon use pattern mapping date and proper use of riparian habitats on herd areas or allotments shared with livestock. Our comments to the 1993 EA questioned the Field Office's use of proper procedures that would require that wild horse use of riparian areas be delineated and appropriate adjustments in users.

It is the duty of the BLM to assure viable herds within these herd management areas. Impacts of the 1988 gathers were not assessed and no new date has been provided in over seven years. The removal of all animals five years or less could have a significant impact on the longevity and productivity of these herds. No census data of these herds or recruitment assumptions are provided in this environmental assessment. Age data collected in 1993 are not expressed or used to support assumptions concerning the 2000 foal crop.

For example, during 1988 the BLM gathered 196 horses that should have provided the age structure and recruitment rate for these herds. Druint 1993, the BLM gathered 156 horses that should have provided a comparative date base to properly estimate herd numbers, recruitment rates, and longevity. While the Field Office discloses that this data exists, arbitrary assumptions are used in the EA.

As stated on Page 6, the cumulative impacts could be significant over time, but presently unknown. We feel that the agency is ignoring this data.

Susan Stokke, Field Office Manager
August 17, 2000
Page 2

Wild horse literature and research has found that there must be a genetic pool with a minimum of 50 adults. The AML's for these herds are far less than the genetic minimum for a viable herd. No data has been provided that insures that these herds are a part of a complex or that the mix of horses can sustain viable populations.

This issue of herd viability and supportive data was raised in the implementation of the 1993 ROD and BLM Adoption Policies. Our agency was given all the assurances that these issues would be addressed in all environmental assessments prepared by the BLM. We ask that the Field Office respect its duty and obligations to the wild horse herds.

Sincerely,



CATHERINE BARCOMB
Administrator

HELICOPTER CAPTURE PLAN
FOR
WILD HORSES
IN THE
NUT MOUNTAIN, HIGH ROCK &
WALL CANYON
HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS
FISCAL YEAR 2000

Bureau of Land Management
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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Capture Plan is to outline the methods and procedures to be used in removing approximately 300 wild horses from the Wall Canyon, Nut Mountain and High Rock Herd Management Areas (CA-265, CA-266 & CA-264) of the Surprise Resource Area (See Map 1). This action would take the wild horse populations to within or near the population ranges established for each of the herd management areas. After attaining AML, the populations of wild horses would then be allowed to increase for 3 to 5 years, at which time, it is projected that the populations would be at the upper end of the established population range. At that time, the need for another removal would be determined based upon the actual wild horse populations present.

The proposed removal would begin sometime after July 1, 2000 and would take approximately three weeks to complete.

II. GENERAL AREA DESCRIPTION - BACKGROUND DATA

The Wall Canyon Herd Management Area is located approximately 40 miles east of Cedarville, California (see attached Map 2). The HMA is bordered by the BLM's Winnemucca District to the east. The HMA consists of approximately 49,000 acres.

The Nut Mountain Herd Management Area is located approximately 35 miles east of Cedarville, California (see attached Map 3). The HMA is bordered by the Wall Canyon HMA to the east, the High Rock HMA to the south, and the Bitner HMA to the north. The HMA consists of approximately 41,000 acres.

The High Rock Herd Management Area is located approximately 35 miles east of Cedarville, California (see attached Map 4). The HMA is bordered by the Wall Canyon and Nut Mountain HMAs to the north, the Fox Hog HMA to the south and the Winnemucca District to the east, the High Rock HMA to the south, and the Bitner HMA to the north. The HMA consists of approximately 115,000 acres.

These HMAs are located in the Cowhead/Massacre Planning Unit. The Environmental Impact Statement for the Cowhead/Massacre Planning Unit was completed in 1980.

Vegetation is typical of the Great Basin Community. The area generally contains scattered patches of mountain mahogany and bitterbrush with large areas of big and low sagebrush.

Proposed gathering and removal for FY 2000 will be conducted in the Nut Mountain HMA (CA-266), the Wall Canyon HMA (CA-265), and the High Rock HMA (CA-264).

In the High Rock HMA, gathering will only be conducted in the East of Canyon Home Range. An appropriate management level for the Little High Rock Home Range of the High Rock HMA has not yet been established.

Appropriate management levels for wild horses in these HMAs were established through the analysis of monitoring data, as documented in the in Environmental Assessment No. CA-028-93-03, dated June 22, 1993. The determinations of appropriate management levels were also upheld in Ruling No. IBLA 94-163, dated July 18, 1995. No additional information has been found since the establishment of these AMLs that show a need to adjust them. The goal is to have wild horses be part of a thriving natural ecological balance among the multiple uses for each of the HMAs. Environmental Assessment CA-370-00-13 has been prepared to analyze impacts associated with the proposed removal.

III. JUSTIFICATION

The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195) as amended, Section 3(b)(2) states "...if an overpopulation exists on a given area of 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, in the following order and priority 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 the overpopulation."

Environmental Assessment CA-028-93-03 was completed on June 22, 1993. The Decision Record issued by the Surprise Field Manager on October 8, 1993, established the appropriate management level (AML) range for each HMA as follows:

<u>HMA Name & Number</u>	<u>AML Management Range</u>
High Rock (CA-264) East of Canyon Home Range	30-40
Nut Mountain (CA-266)	30-55
Wall Canyon (CA-265)	15-25

The above populations have been determined to be the maximum level necessary to achieve and maintain a natural thriving ecological balance in each area. These levels were upheld by IBLA 94-163, dated July 18, 1995.

The maximum number for each range is the maximum carrying capacity for wild horses determined from the monitoring data analysis. The minimum number for the range is the

approximate level of animals which would be expected to increase to the maximum range figure in three to four years.

IV. POPULATION AND REMOVAL DATA

The Wall Canyon, Nut Mountain and High Rock HMAs were last gathered in the Fall of 1993. All herds were placed under structured management at that time.

The current populations of wild horses are estimated as follows:

<u>HMA NAME</u>	<u>CURRENT POPULATION ESTIMATE*</u>
High Rock (East of Canyon Home Range)	200
Nut Mountain	104
Wall Canyon	158

* Not including foals born during 2000.

Estimates for wild horses are based on the projected average annual increase of 17%. Estimated gathering and removal for the HMAs are as follows:

HMA NAME	Appropriate Management Level Range	Estimated Number to Gather	Estimated Number to Remove*
Wall Canyon	15-25	150	100
Nut Mountain	30-55	100	65
High Rock (East of Canyon Home Range)	30-40	200	130
TOTALS	75-120	450	295

* These numbers are estimates of the animals to be removed if age based selective criteria are applied. If older aged animals are allowed to be removed, it is planned to remove enough animals to achieve appropriate management levels.

Enough animals will be released to insure that the number of wild horses falls above the established minimum population range. Any base herd horses that have died since the last structuring and removal will be replaced with animals from those gathered.

It is recognized that it may not be possible to achieve appropriate management levels by removing only horses five years and younger. The removal of older horses will only occur if they can be readily placed through adoption, put into a prison gentling program, or placed in sanctuaries.

V. METHODS OF REMOVAL

Gathering will be conducted by contract or by the Susanville District wild horse gathering crew.

Gathering of wild horses will be done by using a helicopter to herd the animals to a trap constructed of portable pipe panels. The helicopter will be used in such a manner that bands will remain together. Rate of movement and distance animals travel will be based on terrain, physical barriers, weather and condition of animals. All traps and wings will be constructed in such a manner to facilitate safe, humane capture of animals. At all times, gathering will be under direct supervision of a duly authorized employee of the Bureau of Land Management. Humane procedures prescribed by the BLM will be used in all gathering and handling operations.

The majority of the wild horses in each HMA will have to be gathered in an effort to achieve AML if only horses five years or younger are being removed. This will be done only if practical and at no time will horses be placed under undue stress during the gathering operation. The welfare and humane treatment of the animals will remain the BLM's highest priority. If older animals can be removed, it would not be necessary to conduct a complete gather.

Captured animals will be shipped to the BLM's Litchfield Wild Horse and Burro Holding Facility in straight deck trucks. Here the animals will be sorted by age and sex. The Litchfield Facility is well set up to provide for humane handling, preparation, and care of captured animals, with a minimum of stress. Animals to be released will be kept separate from the other animals and returned to their home ranges as quickly as possible. All releases will be done as necessary to insure the population of animals remain at least at the minimum levels called for in the appropriate management levels.

All publicity, formal public contact and inquiries will be handled through the Surprise Field Manager.

VI. REFERENCE TO ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Environmental Assessment No. CA-028-93-03 was prepared in June, 1993 to analyze impacts associated with establishment of current appropriate management levels. Environmental Assessment No. 370-00-13 was prepared to address impacts associated with the removal operations.

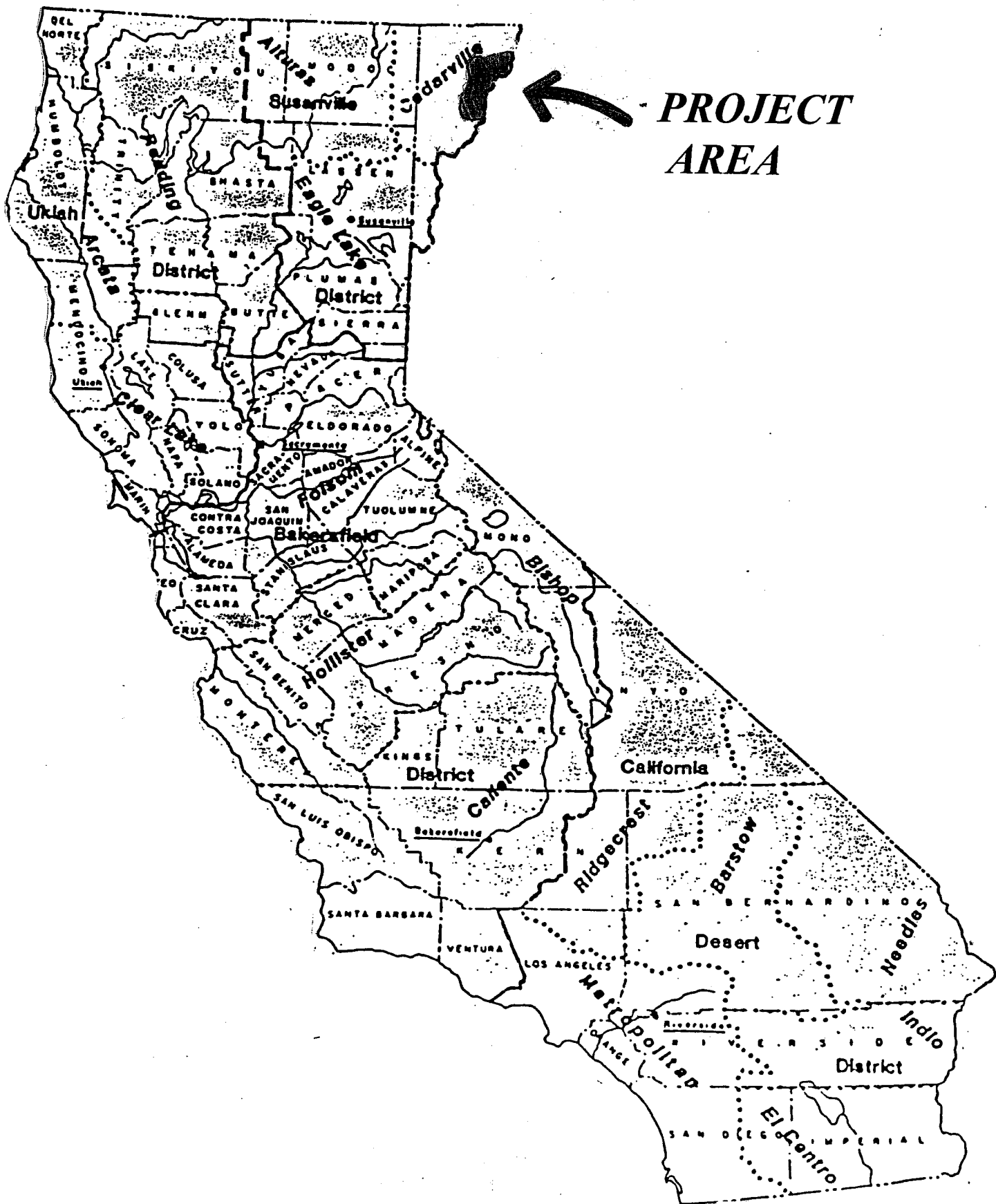
VII. PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

The Helicopter Gathering Plan and associated environmental assessment will be sent to all interested parties who have requested a copy of these documents.

Prepared by: _____
Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist Date

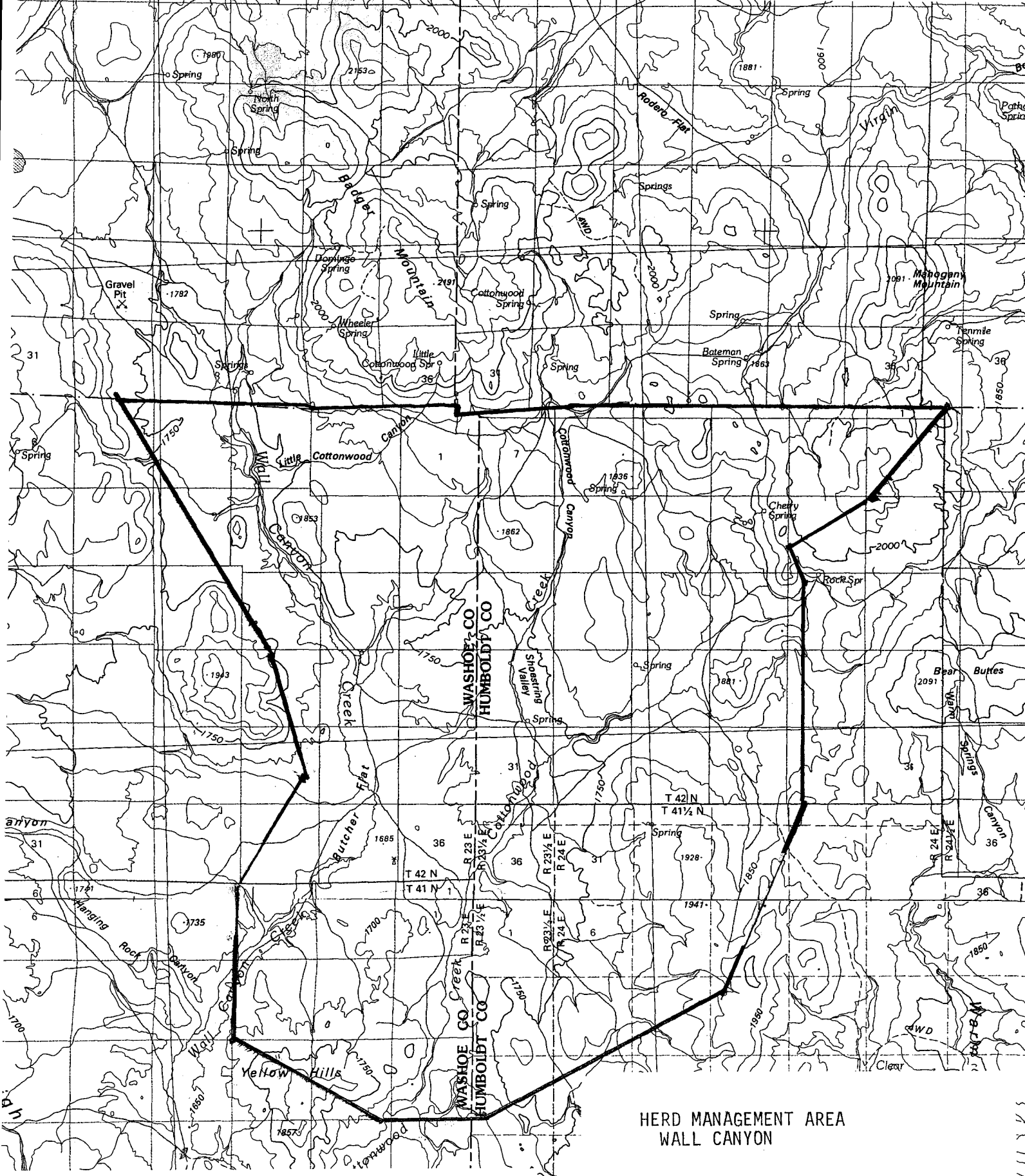
Approved by: _____
Manager, Surprise Field Office Date

Attachments

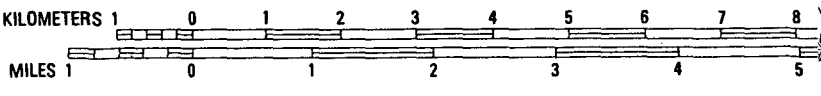


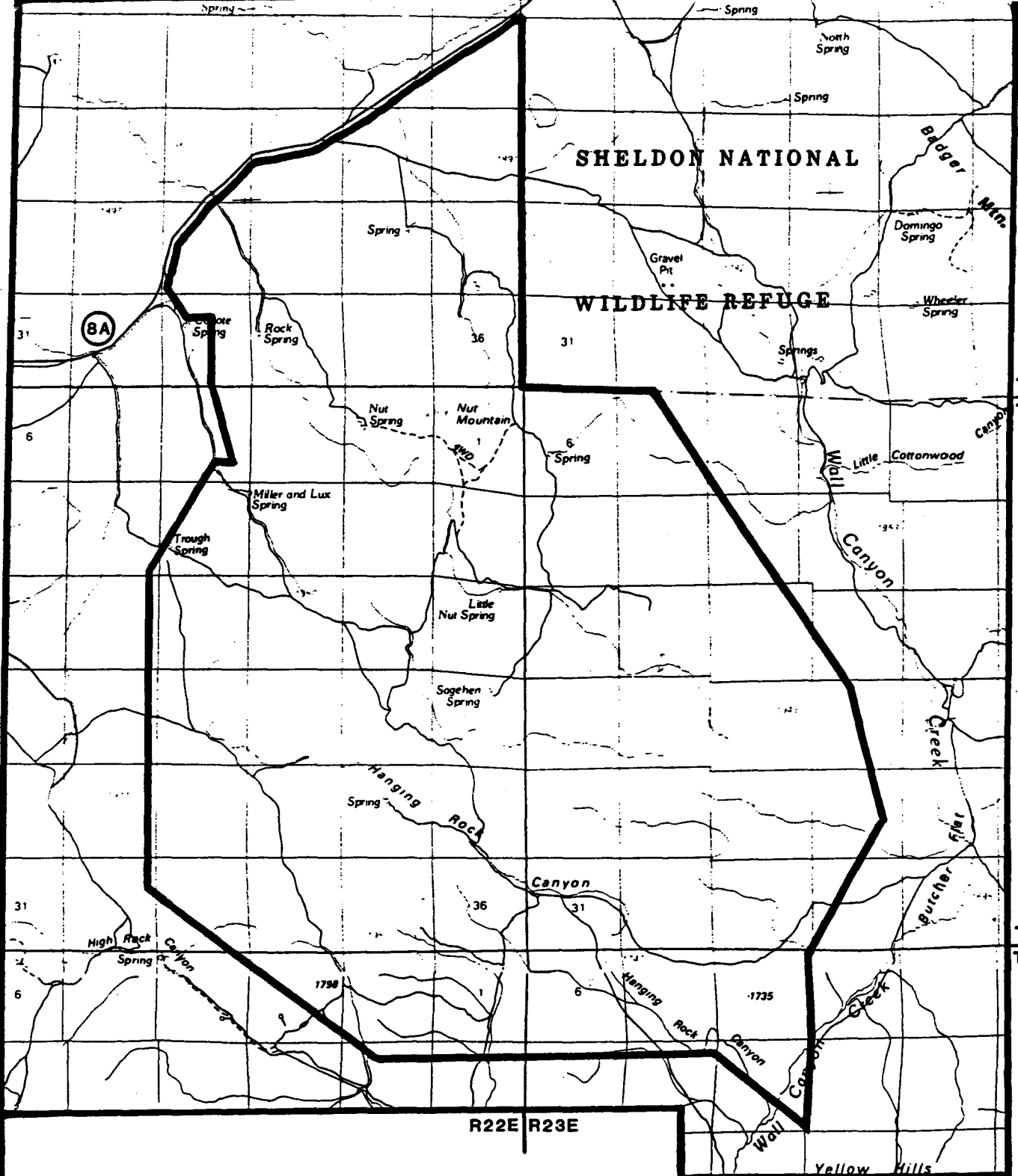
**PROJECT
AREA**

MAP 1- General Location



HERD MANAGEMENT AREA
WALL CANYON

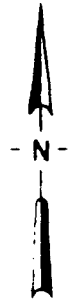


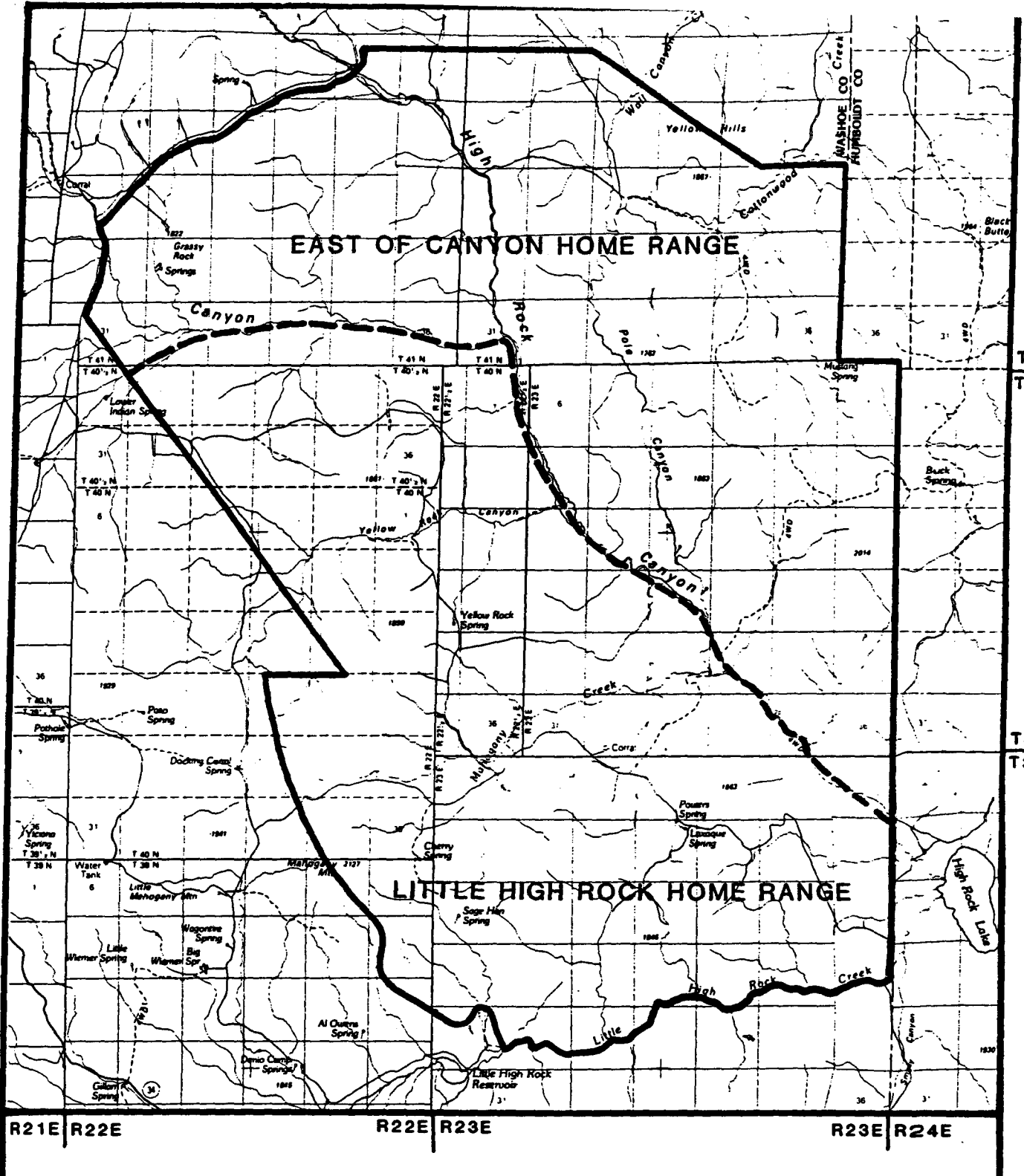


— Herd Management Area boundary

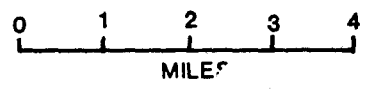


UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
CALIFORNIA STATE OFFICE
HERD MANAGEMENT AREA
NUT MOUNTAIN

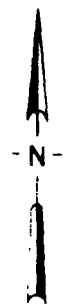




————— Herd Management Area boundary



UNITED STATES
 DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
 CALIFORNIA STATE OFFICE
 HERD MANAGEMENT AREA
HIGH ROCK



**HELICOPTER CAPTURE PLAN
FOR WILD HORSES IN THE
WALL CANYON, NUT MOUNTAIN AND
HIGH ROCK HERD MANAGEMENT AREAS
OF THE SURPRISE RESOURCE AREA
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
NO. CA-370-00-13**

A. Purpose

The purpose of this environmental assessment is to analyze the capture technique to be used in the management of wild horses in the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain Herd Management Areas of the Surprise Field Office (see General Location Map 1). The overriding goal of management is to maintain both a healthy wild horse population and the range in a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship. This environmental assessment does not address the establishment of appropriate management levels for these herd management areas. Appropriate management levels for these HMAs were established through EA No. CA-028-93-03. No additional information has been found that indicates a need to adjust the established management levels.

Relationship to Other Environmental Documents

This EA is tiered to the Cowhead/Massacre Environmental Impact Statement, which analyzed the general ecological impacts of managing rangelands in the planning unit under a program including monitoring and adjustment of wild horses. Additionally, EA No. CA-028-93-03 was finalized in October 8, 1993, which analyzed the impacts of the establishment of appropriate management levels for wild horses in these HMAs. Ruling No. IBLA 94-163, dated July 18, 1995, affirmed the establishment of an AML and subsequent removal of excess animals from the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain HMAs. All of the above documents can be found in the BLM's Surprise Field Office in Cedarville, California.

Relationship to Statutes and Regulations

Both the Code of Federal Regulations(4700) and the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971 provide for the removal of excess wild horses.

B. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to implement the Capture Plan incorporated as part of this document. The Plan calls for the removal of wild horses to achieve appropriate management levels (AML) within the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain HMAs. It is planned to gather only in the East of Canyon Home Range of the High Rock HMA at this time. An appropriate management level for the Little High Rock Home Range has not yet been established. Gathering and removal targets are as shown below.

HMA NAME	Appropriate Management Level Range	Estimated Number to Gather	Estimated Number to Remove
Wall Canyon	15-25	150	100
Nut Mountain	30-55	100	65
High Rock (East of Canyon Home Range)	30-40	200	130
TOTALS	75-120	450	295

The removal of excess wild horses would be accomplished by the use of a helicopter herding the animals into a trap constructed of portable panels. This operation would be accomplished either by BLM employees, contract, or a combination of both. Horses that are gathered and found to be 5 years or younger will generally be placed in the regular adoption program. Horses gathered that are older than 5 years old will generally be released back to the range. In addition, it is planned to collect information on herd characteristics for each of the HMAs, including data to determine population characteristics (age, sex, color, etc.), assess herd health (pregnancy/ parasites/physical condition/etc.), and determine herd condition and trend (blood sampling).

No fertility control vaccinations will be used on these herds.

The objective is to remove wild horses to within the appropriate management level range. However, due to selective removal criteria, it is not expected that appropriate management levels will be achieved with this removal. Periodic removals approximately every three or four years will be necessary to maintain the numbers at the level identified by monitoring and to expand population information for each herd data base.

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

1. Non-Selective Removal Alternative

This alternative would be the same as the Proposed Action, except animals of all ages could be removed. Information on herd characteristics, health, age and sex structure would still be collected but not as completely as the entire herd would not be gathered. This alternative would allow achievement of AMLs..

2. No Action Alternative

The No Action alternative would result in no wild horses being captured, removed, or relocated. Appropriate management levels for the Wall Canyon, High Rock and Nut Mountain HMAs would not be attained. Additional herd population data would not be collected.

C. Affected Environment

The affected environment is described in the Cowhead/Massacre Land Use documents, and more specifically in EA No. CA-028-93-03, dated June 22, 1993.

The HMAs have undergone several removals since the passage of the Act. A summary of removal data during the last two gathers follows.

Wall Canyon HMA (See Map 2) — Since 1988, 106 animals have been removed from the HMA. During the last removal (conducted October 1993), 56 animals were removed from the Wall Canyon HMA. Data from this gather revealed that 62% of the animals gathered were 5 or under, which appears a fairly common ratio for herds in northeastern California/northwestern Nevada which haven't been gathered on a regular basis. Data indicates that the sex ratio for the entire herd at that time was 43% male, 57% female. The animals turned out at that time included 19 males and 28 females (40/60 ratio). It is currently estimated that there are approximately 158 wild horses plus foals born during the spring of 2000.

Nut Mountain HMA (See Map 3) — This herd was also gathered in 1988 and 1993. In 1988, a total of 70 animals were gathered with 30 being returned to the range. In 1993, 36 animals (13 males, 23 females) were gathered. This represents a population of 36% male and 64% female. Of the total number gathered, data indicates 53% were 5 years of age or younger. Of the animals returned, 33% were male and 63% were female. Current estimated population for this HMA is 104 horses plus foals born during the spring of 2000.

High Rock HMA, East of Canyon Home Range (See Map 4) — In 1988, 20 animals were removed from this Home Range. During the last removal, conducted in October 1993, a total of 67 animals were gathered with 42 being removed. Data from this gather indicated that 73 % of the entire population was under 5 years of age. Data also indicates that the entire herd at that time was 49% male, 51% female. The animals turned out at that time included 12 studs and 13 mares. It is estimated that there are currently approximately 200 head plus foals born during the spring of 2000 in the Home Range.

D. Environmental Impacts

1. Proposed Action

Impacts on Horses (Removal)

Some stress to the wild horses would be associated with the helicopter herding. All the procedures discussed in Methods of Removal of the Capture Plan (V) will be strictly adhered to thus minimizing stress and injuries. Unavoidable impacts in the form of injuries to the wild horses may occur as a result of the capture process. Based on previous gathers, the death rate is not expected to exceed 1% of the animals captured.

Managing horses in a range which can be maintained by the vegetative community with other uses would minimize the stress to individual horses associated with limited forage and space resources. Minimizing the day to day stress would be especially important to the young animals. Managing the population in a manner which maximizes the intervals between capture operations minimizes the stress and injuries associated with removals while maintaining the range in a thriving natural ecological balance.

Due to the current estimated numbers, the number of years since the last gather, and the expectation that approximately 65% of the total animals gathered will be 5 years of age or younger, it is not likely that AML will be achieved with this removal. The age-based selective removal would tend to initially result in an

older herd. The herd would be expected to return towards the normal age structure before the next removal.

All animals captured would be shipped to the Litchfield Holding Facility where they would be sorted as to sex and age. Those found to be too old for the adoption program or unadoptable for some other reason will be returned to their respective HMA as soon as practical. All adoptable animals would be prepared and made available for placement through the adoption program.

Impacts of selective removals on wild horse populations were discussed in EA-028-93-03.

Other Impacts

Managing horses to achieve a thriving natural ecological balance would have only positive impacts on horses, domestic livestock, vegetation and wildlife. Maintaining the horse population in balance with the other uses would assure the vegetation community would not be over utilized. As a result, vegetation communities would be maintained or continue to be improved rather than deteriorating from over-use. In addition, horses would have access to adequate water and space which are both requirements for a healthy population.

Under the Proposed Action, there would be a impact on air quality due to the dust from capture operations and the increase in vehicle traffic. This impact would be temporary and diminish when the capture efforts end.

Soils in the vicinity of trap sites would be churned up from trampling. Brush and herbaceous species enclosed in the traps would be trampled and possibly killed. This would be a minor, local impact.

Riparian areas within the HMA would be expected to improve due to reduced grazing pressure occurring during the hot season months.

All trap sites would have cultural and special status species clearances conducted prior to trap construction, therefore, there would be no impact to these values. Potential trap sites with cultural resources or special status species identified will not be utilized.

The project areas includes portions of the East Fort High Rock WSA (CA-020-914) and the Massacre Rim WSA (CA-020-1013) and in the long term, capture efforts will have negligible impacts to the WSAs. There will be a short term impact to solitude resulting from the increase in activity resulting from the

capture operations. This effect would be primarily due to the presence of a helicopter driving horses and vehicle traffic adjacent to the WSA.

Traps, if constructed within the WSA boundary, will be limited to areas immediately adjacent to roads or ways. Any impacts would be limited to trampling of brush inside the traps and soil disturbance associated with turning trucks around at the trap site. In the long term, improved vegetation conditions, associated with decreased grazing by wild horses on both the uplands and riparian habitats, would be a positive impact on wilderness values.

The Proposed Action would not adversely impact air quality, ACECs, recreation, farmlands, floodplains, Native American religious concerns, wastes, water quality, noxious weeds or wild and scenic rivers.

Irreversible and Irretrievable Impacts

There would be no irreversible or irretrievable impacts from implementing the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts are the impacts on the environment which result from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions regardless of what agency or person undertakes such other actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place over a period of time.

The cumulative impacts of removing primarily younger age classes of animals over an extended period is not entirely known. If gathering was conducted on a regular basis (i.e. every 2-3 years) it could be expected that the population would shift from a "normal" age distribution to one made up of primarily older animals.

Alternatives

1. Non-Selective Removal Alternative

Impacts from implementing the Non-Selective Removal Alternative would be largely the same as for the Proposed Action. The primary differences would be age structure of the remaining herd, and required gathering numbers. If animals are removed of all age groups, the age structure for the animals left within the HMA should more closely resemble a normal age structure for the herd. This should be a positive

impact on populations. Repeated removals under this type of management scenario would not lead to an older aged population and should result in a healthier herd. Removals without regard to age would also allow the management of populations to within the established appropriate management levels. Under this alternative, fewer animals would have to be gathered and handled, reducing stress on the population as a whole. This alternative would result in overall positive impacts to the animals and their habitat.

2. No Action Alternative

This alternative would result in no horses being removed which would result in an increase of their numbers beyond the established AML. The animals would not undergo stress involved with the capture effort nor experience injuries or fatalities. As the population increased the horses would experience stress in searching for adequate forage, water and space. The area would not be in a state of thriving natural ecological balance and degradation of the vegetative resource, including riparian areas, would continue. AMLs would not be achieved. The BLM would be in violation of existing laws and regulations and the land use plan objectives would not be achieved. This alternative would not meet the objective of maintaining wild horses within the appropriate management level.

In the longer term, the No Action alternative would slowly result in a decrease of naturalness within the wilderness study areas, due to the increased grazing pressure from uncontrolled populations of wild horses.

The No Action alternative would not adversely impact air quality, ACECs, recreation, farmlands, floodplains, Native American religious concerns, wastes, water quality, wild and scenic rivers, or noxious weeds.

E. Public Participation

This Capture Plan/Environmental Assessment has been sent to the following persons, groups and government agencies in order to solicit comments. Comments received will be considered during finalization of this gather plan/environmental assessment.

Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses
Wild Horse Organized Assistance (WHOA)
Nevada Division of Wildlife
Debra Ellsworth, Redwing Horse Sanctuary
Estill Ranches
Double Horseshoe Ranch
White Pine Ranch

Wildlife Management Institute
Fort Bidwell Tribal Council
Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe
Summit Lake Paiute Tribe
Cedarville Rancheria
Winnemucca Tribal Council

A Notice of Proposed Action for activities proposed within wilderness study areas was also sent to about thirty individuals and groups on the Surprise Field Office Wilderness mailing list.

F. List of Preparers

Rob Jeffers, Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist
Barry Dopp, Rangeland Management Specialist
Roger Farschon, Ecologist
Alan Uchida, Watershed Specialist
Jerry Bonham, Range Technician