

COORDINATED RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLANNING FOR THE
MONTGOMERY PASS WILD HORSE TERRITORYMONO LAKE RANGER DISTRICT - INYO NATIONAL FOREST
PACIFIC SOUTHWEST REGION

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PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

In 1985, the Forest Service prepared a management plan for wild horses within a 200,000 acre range known as the Montgomery Pass Wild Horse Territory (MPWHT). The territory historically supported a wild horse population of approximately 200 horses. The MPWHT includes National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands, located in California and Nevada, and parcels of private inholdings. Two National Forests and two Bureau of Land Management Districts share management responsibilities, with the Inyo National Forest assigned the lead role for coordinating management of the wild horse territory. The 1985 management plan was prepared with limited public or interdisciplinary involvement and relatively unreliable resource data. A wild horse carrying capacity (population management level) of 75-90 horses was established for the territory in that plan.

The interest in the wild horses of the MPWHT culminated in 1985 with a Forest Service decision to reduce the wild horse population from the more than 200 to less than 90 horses. Interests in the MPWHT included: cattle grazing, of which portions of 12 different cattle allotments were affected by the wild horses; private property, important to the management of wild horses because most of the water sources originated on private land; dispersed recreation, including organized wild horse observation trips; wildlife habitat protection, primarily for mule deer and antelope; and, research, focused on the unique predator/prey relationship of the mountain lion on wild horses. This territory is the only known place where wild horses have natural predators capable of maintaining their population within the carrying capacity of the resources.

Individuals and groups concerned about the future of wild horses within the MPWHT convinced the Forest Service to reconsider the 1985 management decisions. Faced with needing to address the many public issues and concerns and coordinate management for the MPWHT on various jurisdictions, the Forest Service proposed using a coordinated resource management planning process for the development of a new management plan. The approach provided for the full involvement of agency decisionmakers and specialists, private citizens, ranchers, researchers, outfitters/guides, state fish/game specialists, recreationists, and representatives of wild horse protection groups. A steering committee, composed of 25 people, reflecting the broad range of interests in the MPWHT management, was established to direct the planning process and make decisions through a common-ground or consensus approach. The Mono Lake District Ranger functioned as the chairperson on the steering committee and assumed the lead role of facilitating the overall process. The Resource Officer and Lands Assistant to the Mono Lake Ranger District provided the necessary logistical support to the process. Task groups were created by the steering committee to accomplish specific work and collect data that the committee determined to be critical in order to make informed decisions.

archaeological, mid range specialists worked together and with non-agency specialists on these task groups. This approach to preparing a management plan for the MPWHT allowed for all concerned persons, organizations, and agencies to work together to find solutions to the issues of: establishing a carrying capacity for the territory; management of the habitat to benefit wild horses and cattle; protection of critical wildlife and wild horse habitat; recreation use levels compatible with wildlife, wild horses and other users; securing water for wild horses and wildlife; and funding for management and improvements.

Role of Participants

The Forest Service leadership role was highly non-traditional in that it involved public members as a full partner in the decisionmaking process. The Forest Service was expected to facilitate a process which the steering committee created and modified to fit the situation. All agency officials on the steering committee participated as equal members of the committee. The entire steering committee functioned as a team and attempted to share the overall burden of work. However, the committee did look to the Forest Service for process guidance and administrative support. Agency resource specialists, FS and BLM, provided technical guidance and collected and analyzed resource data for the steering committee. Researchers from three major universities worked with agency specialists and independently on wild horse and mountain lion research projects. Financial support was provided by both agencies and various sources from the private sector.

Local/Regional Significance

The coordinated resource management planning process, coupled with our common ground approach to decisionmaking, allowed Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management officials and specialists to work as equal partners with ranchers, researchers, recreationists, outfitters, and wild horse preservationists to develop sound decisions for the management of wild horses within the MPWHT. Common respect of opinions and attitudes of people different from each other developed over a period of three or four years. Researchers, permittees, lion hunters, and wild horse specialists worked together in the field and office to examine the issues and look for alternatives that dealt with the concerns of other steering committee members. In a demonstration of support for the work they did, all members of the original steering committee signed the management plan. The steering committee made a commitment to keep the committee active to continue to implement, monitor, and update the management plan. The plan, approved in 1988, was intended to be revised in only five years, when critical research results were anticipated to be available to help "fine-tune" various management decisions. Many members of the steering committee have publicly commended the Forest Service for taking this approach to working with their concerns. They have indicated a respect for the Forest Service as a responsible, sensitive agency and acted themselves responsibly and professionally. They continue to demonstrate confidence and trust in the Forest Service, particularly in the agency members that participated in this process. And, the most important result is that the Forest Service has a management plan that professionally addresses the resource issues and is fully supported by all concerned parties.

The MPWHT is unique from the standpoint of the complexity of management jurisdictions, the mountain lion/wild horse predator/prey relationship, and approach to management itself. First, as previously stated, the MPWHT is administered by two National Forests (Inyo and Tiyoabe) and two Districts of the Bureau of Land Management (Bakersfield and Walker). The territory involves two states (California and Nevada) and three counties (Mono, Esmeralda, and Mineral). Private lands and numerous cattle allotments are included within the MPWHT. Coupled with the intermingled landownership and jurisdiction situation is the range and amount of public special interests involved in this area. The mailing list for this project has over 500 names.

MPWHT is unique as a wild horse range and offers management opportunities known no where else. Wild horses are generally absent of any natural predators that affect or control their population. Hence, management of wild horses commonly requires a capture and adoption program which is costly and a significant disturbance to the animals. In MPWHT, through cooperative research, it has been demonstrated that the wild horse population is remaining relatively stable because of mountain lion predation on wild horse foals. Less than 5 percent of foals born in MPWHT survive to be adults. The net effect is the horses are allowed to live and behave with little or no interference by humans and their population is controlled by a natural predator rather than a costly animal removal/adoption program. If the approach to the management of the MPWHT had been traditional, it is quite possible that the Forest Service would not have recognized this unique situation, nor been in a position to take advantage of management opportunity.

And lastly, this project is unique because of the management approach used to bring concerned people and agency officials together and allow them to problem-solve and make decisions as equal partners. This unique approach to management, which exemplifies excellence in Forest Service work, was recognized by organizers and members of the Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses at their recent symposium held May 5-8, 1991 in Reno, Nevada. MPWHT management, presented by the Mono Lake District Ranger and one steering committee researcher, was "showcased" at the session to encourage others to try approaches that truly involve concerned citizens in the management of their public lands and resources.