

**Ridgecrest Resource Area
Capture Plan for Wild Horse and Burros
for the
Centennial and Slate Herd Management Areas
Fiscal Year 1995**

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this capture plan is to outline the objectives, methods and procedures for the reduction of wild horse and burro populations for the Centennial and Slate Herd Management Areas (HMA's). The majority of the land base for both HMA's (60-70%) are with in the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS) lands administered by the Navy, however, the wild horse and burros are managed cooperatively by the Navy and the BLM. Certain logistical and procedural requirements are essential in implementing a wild horse management program on the NAWS. A Interagency Agreement, No. B-060-A2-0002, signed June 1992, between the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the NAWS prescribes the responsibilities of the two agencies for managing wild horses and burros. To protect classified national security information and also to insure the safety of personnel, the NAWS Commander must, at all times, exercise complete control of all personnel and operations on NAWS range areas. All removal operations will be carefully scheduled to minimize potential conflict with range operations. Security clearances will be obtained through the Navy for the helicopter and gather crew when the gather operations involve the NAWS.

The proposed reductions are in accordance with goals identified in the California Desert Conservation Plan.

II. AREA DESCRIPTION

The Centennial and Slate HMA's are located in the upper Western Mojave Desert of Southern California. The town of Ridgecrest borders the south end of the Centennial HMA and is approximately 21 miles from the upper western boundary of the Slate HMA.

SLATE HMA

The Slate HMA is located within San Bernardino County. There is approximately 520,320 acres in the HMA which includes approximately: 88,320 acres of BLM lands; 1,920 acres state lands; 8,320 acres private lands; 49,920 acres within the Fort Irwin Military Reservation; and 371,840 acres within the China Lake NAWS.

The Slate Mountain Range is located in the northwest quarter of this HMA. It falls within the boundaries of the Slate Range Wilderness Study Area (WSA), CDCA-142. Two major valleys run parallel to the mountain

range. Panamint Valley to the east and Searles Valley to the west. The elevation ranges from 1900 feet up to 5,578 feet at Straw Peak on the southern tip of the range. The western boundary extends south of the NAWS boundary near Slocum Mountain (elevation 5,124) about 5 miles before heading east towards Superior Lake. In the southern portion of the HMA is the Eagle Crags. This is a small range of volcanic mountains ranging in elevation from 3,000 feet to 4,835 feet. From Superior Lake the HMA boundary heads northeastwardly to Goldstone Lake which is 2 miles east of the China Lake NAWS-Fort Irwin Military Reservation boundary. From Goldstone Lake the eastern boundary of the HMA extends past the northern boundary of the Fort Irwin Military Reservation at the Quail Mountains into the Owlshhead Mountains WSA, CDCA-156 just before long valley. The HMA boundary then runs down to the south end of Brown Mountain within the China Lake NAWS and then runs northwestwardly up through Panamint Valley, terminating at the northern slopes of the Slate Mountain Range.

CENTENNIAL HMA

The upper two-thirds of the HMA is within Inyo County. The southern one-third is divided between two counties. The west half is located in Kern County and the eastern half is in San Bernardino County. There is approximately 996,735 acres in the HMA which includes approximately: 338,880 acres of BLM lands; 15,680 acres state lands; 36,480 acres private lands; and 605,695 acres within the China Lake NAWS. A map of the HMA is shown in figure 6 and 7.

The northern boundary of the HMA is Highway 190. The upper western boundary follows close to Highway 395. The lower western boundary follows the western boundary of the China Lake NAWS down to Highway 178 and beyond about 3 miles. The southern boundary parallels Highway 178 up to Poison Canyon where it follows Highway 178 up through Trona to the northern tip of Searles Lake. The HMA boundary follows the shoreline to the southwest where it ties into the west boundary of the Slate HMA. The eastern boundary of the HMA follows the western boundary of the Slate HMA northward up Searles Valley to the northern slopes of the Slate Mountain Range. The Boundary then deviates away from the Slate HMA northward up Panamint Valley, tying into Highway 190 about 2 miles west of Panamint Springs.

In the northwest quarter of the HMA is the Coso Mountain Range. The North Coso Range WSA, CDCA-130 and the Coso Range WSA, CDCA-131 are located in this area. The Coso Mountain Range is primarily volcanic in origin, with deeply cut steep faults in basalt forming a series of mesas on the western side. The elevation ranges from 4,000 feet near the Haiwee Reservoir to 8,160 feet at Coso Peak, where a small forest of pinyon pine and juniper is found. Freshwater springs are few. Along the western edge of the Cosos is a geothermal area with active hot springs and live fumaroles, known as the Coso Hot Springs/Devil Kitchen region. This area has been developed for energy production and currently generates approximately 240 mega watts of electric power.

Coso Basin and Indian Valley Wells makes up the majority of the southwest quarter of this HMA. This area has a interbedded strata of clay, sand and gravel.

The Argus Mountain Range makes up the majority of the eastern half of the HMA. The north end of the range extends into the Nelson Range and the south end terminates at Poison Canyon. This range primarily of volcanic origin. Major faults traverse the range forming steep, jagged ridges, sharp peaks and deep, steep-faced canyons with numerous drainages and extensive series of mesas. Elevations range from 1,847 feet in the Salt Wells Valley to 8,839 feet at the summit of Maturango Peak. The Darwin WSA, CDCA-132A and the Darwin Falls Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) is located at the northern end of this mountain range. This area includes the extreme southern end of Darwin Plateau and portions of the Darwin Hills area near the town of Darwin. Riparian areas are associated with China Garden Spring and Darwin Falls located in Darwin Canyon. The hills and surrounding bajadas have Joshua tree woodland and sagebrush scrub communities. Towards the southern end of the mountain range is the Great Falls Basin WSA, CDCA-132 and the Great Falls Basin ACEC. This area is unique with its riparian attributes. The North Argus Range WSA-CDCA-132B extends from the Darwin WSA down to the Great Falls Basin WSA. Vegetation is primarily mixed creosote desert scrub on the lower elevations and sparse to non-existent (with an occasional pinyon-juniper) on the higher elevations.

III. JUSTIFICATION

The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195) as amended, Section 3(b)(2) requires that if an overpopulation exists on a given area of public lands and that action is necessary to remove excess animals, the authorized officer shall immediately remove excess animals from the range so as to achieve appropriate management level.

The following table lists the appropriate management level, estimated existing populations and the excess above herd management levels.

Herd Management Area	Appropriate Management Level	Estimated Population	Excess Above Management Level
Centennial Horses	168	325	157
Burros	0	100	100
Slate Horses	0	0	0
Burros	0	58	58

Populations can increase by 15% to 25% annually. Taking a conservative reproductive estimate, population numbers could double in five years. Population estimates are based on aerial survey data, ground observations, removals and projected yearly increases of 16 percent. The following is an analysis of methods and reliability of current estimates.

Herd Management Area	Population Estimate Method and Date	Reliability High, Good, Fair, Poor
Centennial	Aerial Census 1994	High
Slate	Air Observations 1993 16% annual increase	High

IV. PROPOSED ACTION

The goal is to capture all the horses within the Centennial HMA (estimated at 325). These animals would be transported to the Ridgecrest corral facility. Approximately 80% of the horses five years old and younger would be removed for the adoption program and the remaining 20% would be released back onto the range to maintain a reasonable age distribution in the herd. In addition, approximately 10% of the horses between the age of 6 and 9 would also be removed for local adoptions within California. It is estimated that between 65 and 90 horses, total, could be removed under this type of selection. The remaining horses would be recorded as to their sex, age, then marked for future identification and released back onto the range. An attempt to remove 50 burros will be made to maintain low burro numbers and move toward the goal of zero. All gathered burros will be placed into the adoption program.

The proposed action is to comply with Federal Statutes, CDCA Plan policy and the NAWS-BLM Interagency Agreement in the removal of wild horses and burros in the Centennial and Slate HMA's. The operation is planned to begin around October 20, 1994 and last for a 30 day period.

V. CAPTURE SITES

Several sites will be needed to gather the wild horses and burros from the HMA'S. Each site will be selected after the round-up crew has determined the location of the animals and how the topography of the area can best be used to implement the gather. In general, all capture sites will be located in areas that have been previously disturbed to cause as little damage to the natural resources as possible. Capture corral sites will be located on and adjacent to existing roadways. No corral shall be set up in a WSA. Trap sites and temporary corrals will be confined within the WSA boundary roads, cherrystems or areas excluded from WSA's. Cherrystems are existing roads open for vehicle traffic that borders a WSA. Special care will be taken to minimize disturbance to resource values in gather areas.

CAPTURE SITES

Proposed Trap Sites on NAWS administered lands for the Centennial HMA

1. Sweetwater Wash. T. 24 S, R. 41 E, Sec. 10 SWSW, M.D.B.M.
2. Birchum Springs. T. 23 S, R. 42 E, Sec. 18 SENW, M.D.B.M.
3. Coso Hot Springs. T. 22 S, R. 39 E, Sec. 10 SENW, M.D.B.M.
4. Wild Horse Mesa. T. 22 S, R. 41 E, Sec. 21 SESE, M.D.B.M.
5. Big Cactus Flat. T. 21 S, R. 38 E, Sec. 12 NWNW, M.D.B.M.
6. El Conejo Mine. T. 21 S, R. 41 E, Sec. 30 NWSW, M.D.B.M.
7. Cole Spring. T. 20 S, R. 40 E, Sec. 32 SESW, M.D.B.M.
8. Darwin Wash. T. 20 S, R. 41 E, Sec. 29 SENW, M.D.B.M.

Proposed Trap Sites on BLM Administered Lands for the Centennial HMA

9. Thorndike Mine. T. 20 S, R. 38 E, Sec. 31 SENW, M.D.B.M.
10. Lower Centennial Flat. T. 19 S, R. 39 E, Sec. 25 SENE, M.D.B.M.
11. Little Cactus Flat. T. 20 S, R. 37 1/2 E, Sec. 12 NENE, M.D.B.M.
12. Nadeau Trail. Runs in a north-south direction on the east side of the Argus Mountain Range.
T. 18 S, R. 42 E, Sec. 28 SWSW, M.D.B.M. Intersects HWY 190
T. 22 S, R. 43 E, Sec. 28 NWNE, M.D.B.M. Intersects HWY 178

Proposed Trap Sites on NAWS administered Lands for the Slate HMA

1. Road Ways on the east side of the Slate Mountain Range and between Wingate Pass.
T. 25 S and 26 S, R. 45 E, M.D.B.M.
2. Indian Spring Road. Runs in a west-east direction south of the Eagle Crags.
T. 30 S, R. 46 E, Sec. 7, M.D.B.M. West End
T. 30 S, R. 46 E, Sec. 1, M.D.B.M. East End
3. Searles Valley on the east side of Searles Lake playa.
T. 26 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 33, M.D.B.M.

Proposed Trap Sites on BLM Administered Lands for the Slate HMA

1. Indian Ranch Road and associated exclusion areas. The road runs in a north-south direction on the east side of the Slate Mountain Range.
T. 22 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 3 NWSW, M.D.B.M. North End at Ballarat
T. 22 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 35 S 1/2, M.D.B.M. Exclusion Area
T. 23 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 14 NENW, M.D.B.M. Exclusion Area
T. 24 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 12 NESW, M.D.B.M. Intersects Route P170

2. Route P152. Runs in a west-east direction. West end intersects Route P170.
T. 24 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 12 SENW, M.D.B.M. West End
T. 24 S, R. 45 E, Sec. 7 NESW, M.D.B.M. East End
3. Route P103 and associated roads. Runs in a north-south direction on the west side of the Slate Mountain Range.
T. 22 S, R. 43 E, Sec. 33 NENE, M.D.B.M. North End
T. 24 S, R. 43 E, Sec. 22 NWNE, M.D.B.M. Intersects Route P130
4. Route P130. Runs in a east-west direction on the west side of the Slate Mountain Range.
T. 24 S, R. 43 E, Sec. 22 NWNE, M.D.B.M. West End
T. 24 S, R. 44 E, Sec. 18 SENW, M.D.B.M. East End (Outside WSA)
5. Route P168. Runs in a southeast-northeast direction on the west side of the Slate Mountain Range.
T. 24 S, R. 43 E, Sec. 13 NWNW, M.D.B.M. Intersects Route P130
T. 24 S, R. 43 E, Sec. 12 SENE, M.D.B.M. Northeast End

VI. METHODS OF CAPTURE

The proposed activities include the use of a Bell helicopter, 4 to 5 wranglers on horseback, 8 to 10 saddle horses, temporary corrals to hold the wild horses or burros, trucks and trailers to remove the captured animals. All work will be done by personnel experienced in gathering operations.

One of two methods of capture will be employed, depending on the number and type of animals to be gathered. Typically, if the number is 15 horses or greater, a run trap will be used. If less than 15 horses or if it is burros that are being gathered, wranglers on horseback will rope and capture the animals. Both methods will be assisted by the helicopter to locate and herd the targeted animals to the capture site and assist the wranglers in capturing the animals.

It is expected that the number of animals herded will vary from 1 to 20 head. All attempts will be made to move and keep the band together. Rate of movement and distance animals travel will be based on terrain, physical barriers, weather and condition of animals. Burros would be herded a distance of up to six miles by the helicopter. Burros would not be moved at more than 10 miles an hour, and would be given a chance to rest as necessary. Should any animal become fatigued or undue stress is noted, the pilot will break off pursuit, so the animal(s) may rest and recover.

Each area will be flown prior to the start of the roundup to locate the animals, study the terrain and locate any hazards to the burros and/or horses while being herded (fences, cliffs, etc.). Flight time would not exceed 8 hours a day. The helicopter would normally fly at heights from 50 to 100 feet, although it would drop as low as 5 or 6 feet when turning the animals. This latter action would be brief (2 to 4 minutes), and would occur within 200 meters of the corral. Refueling would involve one fuel truck, which would be

restricted to existing roads. Refueling would occur three to four times a day on flat, previously disturbed areas near the corral.

Heavy trucks will be necessary to transport the captured animals to holding facilities, thus trapping locations will be limited to those areas where suitable access exists. The temporary corral would be located near road ways or in road ways that are cherry stemmed from WSA's. The corral and related structures will be installed by hand using hand tools and will be removed upon completion of the gather in the area. A new site may then be set up according to the location of any other herds. If vehicle traffic needs access through the corral when it is positioned in the road or if the corral is going to be left over night, the end panels will be removed to allow access through the corral. The temporary corral would be constructed of portable steel pipe panels (height 6 to 7 feet) and would be self supporting. The dimensions of the corral will vary with the topography and the dimensions of the road.

Run traps will have two temporary wing extensions posed at 45 to 90 degree angles from two sides of the corral. A wing extension consists of 6 feet high jute netting supported by steel tee-posts spaced approximately 15 to 20 feet apart for a distance up to 300 feet. The jute provides a visible barrier that aids in herding the animals to the trap corral. Run traps are usually placed in arroyos or immediately over the crest of a hill where the corral extensions are easily disguised or not easily seen. The extensions create a funnel into which animals are herded by the helicopter and wranglers on horseback. As the helicopter herds the horses to the capture site, the wranglers will be stationed in a concealed location at the ends of the wings. When the animals are close, a decoy domestic "parader" horse is released by a wrangler and the wild horses usually follow the domestic animal into the funnel. Wranglers stationed at the periphery of each extension assist the helicopter in preventing the animals from turning back and escaping the trap. Once a group of animals is in the corral, a gate is closed and capture is complete.

Colts and mothers occasionally become separated or which escape during capture. The escaped mother or colt would be roped to keep the colt from being orphaned. Only horses that must be captured individually would be roped.

The rope and capture method involves the helicopter to herd the wild animals to the wranglers on horse back. The wranglers will be positioned out of view from the on coming animals and in an area that allows the wranglers to maneuver their horses when giving chase. The helicopter will bring the main herd to a holding area and will break off a smaller set of animals that the wranglers can manage, usually one animal per wrangler. These animals are herded to the capture area. The wranglers will give chase, rope by lassoing the animal around the neck and leading the captured animal into the corral. This is repeated until all the targeted animals are captured.

Both trapping techniques require careful consideration of potential impacts to cultural, natural and military resources. The location of the trap sites would be subject to Navy approval on the Navy lands to insure that resource degradation or interference with military operations would be avoided, minimized or mitigated.

Approximately 8 to 10 saddle horses would be used in each operation. Those horses not being used during the capture will be kept tied to or left inside of the horse trailer during the round-up. A portable Powder River loading chute with plywood side boards will be used to load the captured animals onto goose-neck horse trailers that are pulled by 1-ton four wheel drive trucks and transported to the BLM Ridgecrest Corrals, where they will be sorted. The captured animals would receive water and feed according to their needs. Handling of the animals would be kept to a minimum in order to avoid traumatizing the animals as much as possible. A veterinarian would be on call at all times.

SORTING

All animals gathered will be brought back to the BLM Ridgecrest Corrals. Captured wild horses and burros are very sensitive to people. Because of this, the number of team members to handle the animals shall be limited to essential personnel to alleviate stress on the animals. The number of animals will be counted as they come off the trailer. The first consideration after unloading is to determine which animals, if any need special attention for injuries, illnesses or any other problems requiring prompt attention. Pairs, yearling and younger horses are separated from older horses. Orphans shall be separated and provisions made to feed and care for them. The older horses will be separated by sex. Burros will be sorted by pairs and by sex. Approximately 80% of the horses five years old and younger will be removed for the adoption program and the remaining 20% would be released back onto the range. In addition, approximately 10% of the horses between the age of 6 and 9 would also be removed for local adoptions within California. The remaining horses would be recorded as to their sex, age, then marked for future identification and released back onto the range. All gathered burros will be placed into the adoption program.

VII. RESPONSIBILITIES

A National Gathering Contract administered through the BLM Nevada State Office in Reno will be awarded to a third party to conduct the gather operation with oversight and control by Ridgecrest BLM and NAWS. It will be the responsibility of the Project Inspector (Wild Horse and Burro Technician) from the Ridgecrest Resource Area Office to locate all round-up sites to assure that the capture is being conducted in accordance with applicable regulations, BLM policy, in accordance with the California Desert Plan and the interim HMAP, and NAWS requirements. The Project Inspector will also insure that the animals are humanely treated (both using the helicopter and on the ground), work in a safe manner, observe the guidelines set forth in the capture plan and to determine if destruction of any sick or injured animals is necessary during the round-up. If for some reason the Wild Horse and Burro Technician is unavailable, the Ridgecrest Resource Area Wild Horse and Burro Specialist or the Supervisory Range Conservationist will act in his absence.

The Project Inspector will keep the Ridgecrest Resource Area Supervisory Range Conservationist advised of progress and of any problems in implementing the capture plan. The Range Conservationist in turn will keep the Ridgecrest Resource Area Manager informed.

VIII. INJURIES AND DISEASE

For injuries and disease not requiring destruction, the Project Inspector will determine if the animal can be transported to the Ridgecrest Corrals without further injury, harm or undue pain to the animal. If the animal can be transported, the animal will be treated upon arrival at the Ridgecrest Corrals. If the animal cannot be transported, or if the Project Inspector is uncertain, a veterinarian will examine the injured or sick animal at the capture site.

VIII. DESTRUCTION OF INJURED OR SICK ANIMALS

Any severely injured or sick animal shall be destroyed in accordance with 43 CFR 4740.31. Such animals shall be destroyed only when a definite act of mercy is needed to alleviate pain and suffering. When the Project Inspector is unsure as to the severity of an injury or sickness, a veterinarian will be on call to make a final determination. Destruction shall be done in the most humane method available.

IX. SAFETY

All capturing and handling of the animals shall be done in the safest manner possible for the wild animal, personnel and saddle horses. Some guidance may be obtained from "Safety Guidelines for Handling Wild Horses", prepared by the BLM, Burns District Office. An Aviation Safety Plan has been completed and approved for this action. All Aircraft Safety and CDD Communication procedures outlined in that plan will be adhered to.