

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Humboldt
National
Forest

Ruby Mountains R.D.
P.O. Box 246
Wells, NV 89835

9/18/90

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Reply To: 2260

Date: September 18, 1990

Wild Horse Organization Assistance
15640 Sylvester
Reno, Nevada 89511

Dear Dawn Lappin:

Enclosed you will find the notes from the Cherry Springs Wildhorse Territory scoping tour. I feel this tour was very productive and we received many new good ideas. It was also represented by individuals from several interest groups which gave those on the tour several different view points. The information we gathered on this tour has given us the essential tools needed to lay the ground work for the Environmental Assessment.

Through the scoping tour and individual contacts, I have increased the mailing list for correspondence concerning this territories plan. For the benefit of those recently added to the list, I have included a map and some facts concerning the territory.

If you have any issues, concerns, or opportunities not listed in the scoping tour letter please respond to Mitch Bulthuis of this office, (702) 752-3357, by the 30th of September.

I would like to thank all of those people and organizations that have assisted us with this wildhorse territory. Your comments have focused our planning on those issues important to the management of these horses.

Sincerely,

Leresa A. Harey

FOR MONT E. LEWIS, JR.
District Ranger

CHERRY SPRINGS WILDHORSE TERRITORY
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT SCOPING TOUR

A scoping tour of the Wild Horse Territory was held July 20, 1990 with the following attendees: Dave Fallis and Gary Schaffran of the Humboldt NF S.O., Steve Foree of the Nevada Department of Wildlife in Elko, Bob Brown and Bill Lindsey of BLM in Ely, Cathy Barcomb and Dawn Lappin of the Wildhorse Commission in Reno, Fred Zaga, a permittee with his guest Anton Wehling, and Doug Sorensen, Tom Montoya, Mitch Bulthuis, Frank Stilwill and Teri Haney of the Ruby Mountains Ranger District.

STOP I

The tour began at the entrance to Willow Creek with Mitch welcoming those in attendance and giving the overall objectives of the day. He explained that the current Cherry Springs Wildhorse Management Plan was approved in 1977. This plan based range capacity at 58 head of horses using the 1974 range analysis. This plan allowed numbers to be reduced to 42 head. Then numbers would be allowed to increase to 68 head before another gather would occur.

Mitch went on to explain that the current wildhorse numbers are approximately 115 head. This is 50% over the recommended stocking levels. The common use livestock users are removing their livestock once utilization standards are reached on their allotments. The wildhorses are remaining on the allotments and reducing forage even further. This practice not only causes disparity between the livestock and wildhorse interests but also adds to the depletion of range condition.

The Forest Service has been promising to gather for the past 5 years. However due to budget or legal constraints these gathers have not occurred.

In 1988 the Forest felt it should join the Ely District of the BLM in a joint gather. Unfortunately, this gather was appealed by the Animal Protection Institute (API). Judge John Kelly, a administrative judge for the BLM, concurred with portions of API's appeal in that the Environmental Analysis for the gathers of horses did not adequately address present "ecological condition."

Doug Sorensen discussed utilization of the area and that although there is adequate summer feed, utilization in winter is presently 80-90%. The Forest's recommended standards and guidelines for utilization on year round grazing are set at 40-50%. These standards were set to maintain a thriving ecological condition under the set grazing strategy. Since most of the critical range is currently in fair or poorer condition, the Forest recommends that utilization be set at 40%. The 1989 and 1990 utilization studies were consistent with recommendations of the 1974 range analysis. This territory is overstocked by 50 to 60%.

The Forest Service proposes to return the territory to a thriving ecological condition by bringing wildhorse numbers into compliance with proper utilization standards. This will be monitored through two range trend transects and annual utilization inspections. The utilization inspections are the same used to evaluate livestock.

Frank Stilwill explained that the population and grazing habits have changed drastically. With current over crowding, larger bands are being pushed out of the territory in an effort to avoid bachelor bands. Horses are moving around more and using lower winter ranges during the summer. Normal band habits, such as setting up territories, are not occurring. To add to the overstocking problem, the 5-year drought we are experiencing has dried up many water sources. Buck Springs is dry which forces the horses into higher terrain. Cherry Springs is very low and horses are heading toward Sherman Peak and north off the territory.

There had been roundups in the mid-60's and early 70's which reduced the count to around 100 head.

The Cave Creek Cattle Allotment, located on the east side of the territory, has an 80-90% to 50-60% use rate even though there are no cattle currently using the area, reported Tom Montoya. This use is exclusively wild horse. In 1987, livestock numbers were reduced by about 50% on this allotment. However, due to lack of water livestock haven't used this part of the allotment since 1986. This area is also prime winter range for deer. There is slim potential for water in this area, therefore, wildhorses will continue to use the area only when they have access to snow. At the time of study, 46% of this allotment was in poor condition and in a downward trend.

Mitch Bulthuis talked about current conditions. He pointed out where troughs were located. He noted the the location of the pipelines, and which were operational and which were not. He then laid out a three phase plan for Cherry Springs. Phase I is the range condition phase. It involves getting stocking down to desired levels, installing 1,000 feet of pipe in lower Cherry Springs, thus connecting a presently unusable 2 miles of pipe, and installation of deer wood rail jump fences to reduce mortality. Phase II is the improvement stage. It involves fencing off a 4 section pasture, construction of a water trap, installing shutoff valves on all spring and fall water sources of on the territory, non-structural range improvements (burning, chaining, seeding, etc.), and building fenced exclosures around overflow water. Phase III is the informational phase. It involves development of a interpretive road, signs, and brochures.

Dawn Lappin pointed out that one criticism of plans is that knowledge of horse movement isn't involved or mentioned. Concerned parties want to know what these movement patterns are, the reasons for them, etc. All this information is vital to share so that concerned groups see that we recognize the situation, have studied it and have facts to support our recommendations.. She also wondered why the plan in 1989 was appealed. Mitch explained that since the Forest Service was using the BLM as a vehicle to gather horses, and the BLM was appealed, we were automatically included.

STOP II

Discussion was held on how cattle and horses interact. Horses are moved off the Cherry Springs Allotment by May 1 of each year during our annual spring counting. Cattle are permitted onto the allotment around May 15. This year cattle were held off until June 1 so seed could set prior to grazing. Due to the drought, grasses are not coming back as they have had little growth this year. Horses have been kept off the unit this growing season and little use

can be seen. Over the past few years cattle have been removed from the allotment early. In fact, current grazing has been 50% of permitted use. The Walker and Minola pastures of this allotment were seeded in the 1970's. Utilization of these pastures has been higher than other, non seeded pastures, to help keep the needed crested wheatgrass growth form.

Dawn voiced a concern over developing seeding plans that exclude horses or livestock from the seeding. If numbers are at proper levels, the horses should be allowed to be anywhere in the territory, including the seeded areas. Make sure we stress this position strategy and horse management point.

Frank continued by discussing the sheep operation within the territory. Pete Paris is the permittee on this sheep range. He runs approximately 4,800 head in the high country. He moves through this allotment to the north. Horses are getting up against his operation. This year he had to haul water to his sheep due to the drought. Conflict between sheep and horses is minimal to nonexistent.

Dawn asked how Animal Damage Control (ADC) conducted predator control in the area, specifically whether or not they used aerial shooting. ADC no longer uses aerial control in this area Frank explained. Less control work is being observed practiced due to economic concerns.

STOP III

This stop dealt with the minerals interests in the area. Mitch discussed the 5 active minerals operations within the territory. There is potential for mineral development. Last year there was some gas and oil exploratory work completed on the western boundary of the territory.

Last year with the increased minerals activity compounded with the horses social problems caused by increased wildhorse numbers, wildhorses were constantly moving. Presently the Forest Service only imposes mineral operation restrictions during foaling season. If a large scale minerals activity does occur the loss of habitat on this small territory can be a consideration.

An advantage to mineral development is the increased interest, by mining companies, to mitigate conflicting resources. Dawn stated, if a large scale operation does occur, wild horse grazing habits would change during short-term disturbance, but horses will return to old habits once they become accustomed to the new activity.

STOP IV

The intent of this stop was to discuss the interpretive phase of the plan (phase III). Mitch said this phase is designed to educate the public about wildhorses and their management along with providing recreational wildhorse viewing. The viewing area or overlook will allow the public to see the wild horses in their natural setting. Water troughs, salting, and vegetation manipulation, such as seeding and burning, may be used to attract horses into areas where they can be seen from the road. Roads will be improved to get to the viewing and interpretative areas. One consideration is to tie wildhorse information into information about the Pony Express route, aboriginal use of the area, stage route, and other historical or local points of interest. For this phase to be successful, it must be funded cooperatively with other organizations and developed with volunteer labor.

The area will be managed under a multiple use concept. Fred Zaga voiced his concern that it must be assured that horses are out of the area before the snow melts to avoid pulling up plants by the roots. He has no problem with horses being in the area in the fall. A good management plan can resolve some of these issues. Right now, numbers are a key issue.

Frank pointed out the planned location of a water trap. He noted that with a short fence we could make a four section holding pasture. Within the pasture a trough would be installed. When a gather was necessary, water outside this pasture could be shut off forcing horses to enter the pasture to drink. Riders could then enter this pasture from the north. Traditionally when these horses are disturbed in this manner they move along the southern boundary fence where a permanent trap would be installed. This method of trapping would allow us to capture small numbers of horses, while exerting minimal stress to the animals.

Tom explained that wildlife is plentiful in the area. These wildlife species must be an integral part of the planning. In Phase II, all water trough overflows will be fenced to keep wildhorses and livestock out. This will create wildlife riparian areas, which presently are non-existent. Boundary fences in the territory were constructed higher than deer can jump in order to hold horses within the territory. Unfortunately, due to fence height, we have experienced deer mortality on these fences. The Ranger District will be working with wildlife groups to install wood rail jump fences along deer migration routes. This should eliminate deer mortality. The plan must also take into account threatened, endangered, and sensitive (TES) species. The flammulated owl, peregrin falcon, bald eagle, and spotted bat are TES species that may be, or are, found in the territory.

Proposed horse management of the area includes maintaining numbers at around 45-60 head. This would mean a major gather would be required initially in the fall or winter (hopefully next year) of approximately 60 head. This would bring horse numbers into compliance with recommendations of current utilization studies. Ideally, the herd size would increase at such a rate that only a small gather would be needed every 4 years. There are two advantages to this. First, it would allow us to gather at water traps allowing us a minimal expense for gathers. Second, horses under four years of age are more adoptable, thus reducing time and expense of confinement.

During the initial gather we would like to gather all horses. This would allow us to inventory them. Lead and dominate mares and stallions that are in permanent bands, will be identified and released. If possible we would like to place a small 2 inch brand on the shoulder, for example, to identify these animals. Then if they are caught in the water traps they can be immediately released thus reducing stress to the animal.

This herd is fairly small in size. To reduce in breeding, criteria on this herd's conformation, height, breeding, and other characteristic will be developed. After a gather 2-3 mares matching this criteria will be imported from other territories.

STOP V

Steve Foree discussed wildlife, particularly big game, in the area. Several chaining areas for deer occurred in the 70's. The bulk of the resident deer herd winter in this area (population of 20,000). He explained, recently there have been only three years of complete migration from Harrison to Overland Passes. In intermediate years, the deer stay north. The mountain lion numbers vary according to the deer population. This area is known to house upland game, bobcat, and coyote. This is not considered an elk management area, but slowly more elk are appearing in the Ruby area. Major concerns to Steve are the wintering deer and upland game.

During hunting season, primarily rifle season from October 1 through November 15, approximately 1,000 animals are harvested.

Dawn was concerned about the loss of horses during hunting season. She felt that if hunting groups were to large and unmanaged they would harass horses. Frank said he had seen no harrassment of these horses. He noted that this is oovious when you look at the complacency of these horses towards our vehicles and man.

The general condition of the deer winter range is good according to Steve (this does not reflect the ecological condition). There are spots that are poorer, but the overall area covered by winter range is in pretty good condition. The future looks good for this area. A series of fires have destroyed a lot of the deer winter range which causes some concern. Steve is hoping that management of the area can make up for these losses.

Tom explained that during the spring the horses used 90-100% of the rabbitbrush leaving the bitterbrush alone. The deer used about 35-40% of the bitterbrush. If the rabbitbrush was used up, the horses would probably start on the bitterbrush which could present a conflict with the deer. Research is continuing to help educate us on needs and preferred foods of wild horses.

Bob and Bill expressed some concern over the egress and ingress with the BLM. Frank explained that we have lost some horses to the BLM. However, little travel has occurred in the opposite direction. These animals are very territorial and prefer their traditional grounds. Once herd size is brought down to where horses are not competing for food, loss of horses across the boundary should be greatly reduced.

CHERRY SPRINGS
WILDHORSE TERRITORY
FACT SHEET

Total area of territory 23,081 acres.

- Approximately 35 acres of territory are on private land the remaining area is on National Forest Lands.
- The territory is completely enclosed by either natural boundaries or fences.
- The territory is a key mule deer winter range.
- Adequate water does exist but more development is needed.
- The 1989 head count puts herd size at 115 horses. Approximately 23 young are born each spring. By the end of the summer herd size only increases by 7 head. Suspected attrition attributed to cougar kill.
- Capacity based in available winter range (9249 acres) sets numbers at around 60 head.
- Presently winter ranges are becoming severally depleted, range condition is poor, and range condition is in a downward trend.
- Territory is heavily accessed by geological interests and wood cutters. There is a high probability of mineral development in the future.
- Horses have excellent conformation. Before territory designation local ranchers imported quality quarter and thoroughbred horses.
- Territory is mostly grazed by wildhorses. Some seasonal cattle and sheep grazing does exist but grazing impacts can easily be separated (see map).
 - Cherry Springs Cattle Allotment is grazed by cattle late spring and summer. Horses are easily moved from the pasture prior to cattle turnout.
 - Cave Creek Cattle Allotment is located on the eastern slopes of the territory. due to lack of water permittee does not use this portion of the allotment.
 - Corta Sheep Allotment, sheep are trailed from Waterspout spring north past Sherman Mountain. Sheep are Moved every two to three days.

