

a 2-19-91

Nellis

IN REPLY REFER TO:



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

CALIENTE RESOURCE AREA

P.O. Box 237

Caliente, Nevada 89008

In Reply Refer To:
4720.1
(NV-055.10)

(702) 726-3141

FEB 19 1991

CERTIFIED MAIL #P 056 647 112
RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

Comm. for the Pres. of Wild Horses
ATTN: Cathy Barcomb
Stewart Facility
Capitol Complex
Carson City, NV 89710

Dear Ms. Barcomb:

Seven months ago the Bureau of Land Management, Las Vegas District solicited public comments for a draft Gather Plan for the Nellis Air Force Range and associated Environmental Assessment. Your comments and those of other interested parties which were received and addressed the adequacy of these draft documents have been incorporated into the final Gather Plan and Environmental Assessment.

Attached, you will find the final Nellis Air Force Range Gather Plan, Environmental Assessment and Decision Record/Rational and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). As identified in the Decision Record/Rational and FONSI, the proposed action is to remove 800 to 2,000 wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range to achieve a thriving natural ecological balance between wild horses and their environment. Monitoring data pertinent to the proposed action is discussed in the Affected Environment section of the Environmental Assessment.

Should you choose to appeal the Las Vegas District Manager's decision, you may file an appeal in accordance with 43 CFR 4.4 within 30 days of receipt of the written decision.

If you have any questions, please contact Jule Durfee, Wild Horse and Burro Specialist at the Caliente Resource Area.

Sincerely,

Terry Lee Smith
Curtis G. Tucker,
Area Manger

- Attachments:
- Gather Plan (15 pp.)
 - Environmental Assessment (23 pp.)
 - Decision Record/ Rational and FONSI (1 pp.)

Nellis

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ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
for the
NELLIS AIR FORCE RANGE WILD
HORSE GATHER

EA No. NV-055-00-22

Prepared by Jule Durfee
Wild Horse and Burro Specialist

Bureau of Land Management
Las Vegas District
Caliente Resource Area
Caliente, Nevada

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Las Vegas District, Caliente Resource Area, proposes to remove excess wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range. The proposed gather area is within the Nellis Air Force Range located in Clark, Lincoln and Nye counties of southern Nevada (Appendix I).

Purpose and Need

This Environmental Assessment (EA) analyses the impacts to the human environment of the Proposed Action and Alternative(s). The purpose of the Proposed Action is to remove between 800 and 2,000 excess wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range. The removal of wild horses is necessary to bring the number of horses toward a balance with the available supply of perennial water and to prevent further degradation of the vegetative community from excess numbers of wild horses.

Wild horses census conducted in July, 1989 counted 6,255 horses on the Nellis Air Force Range. The Bureau implemented an emergency gather to remove 683 wild horses in December of 1989, following an extended period of drought during which an unknown number of horses died of thirst. Extreme drought conditions in July of 1990 resulted in the confirmed death of 48 wild horses. A potential disaster was averted when the Air Force agreed to haul water to the wild horses. Following heavy rains in August, 1990, a census showed an actual count of 4,302 wild horses.

Field inventory data indicate that sufficient perennial water is available within the gather area to support 1100-1200 wild horses.

Relationship to Planning

The Nellis Air Force Range Resource Plan/Final EIS (U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 1990) is currently under protest. The Bureau recognizes the protest to this plan. Final determination of this protest would not alter the data which demonstrate that insufficient water and forage are available to support the existing wild horse population within the Nellis Air Force Range.

Portions of the proposal area are covered by the Nevada Wild Horse Range Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) (1985). The proposal is in conformance with the HMAP as well as the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195), as amended.

Major Issues

This proposal addresses two major issues: 1) the management of wild horse numbers to achieve a thriving natural ecologic balance

between the animals and their environment; and 2) the humane treatment and safe handling of the wild horses during capture, care, temporary holding, and transportation to the BLM adoption preparation facility.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to remove excess wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range. Implementation of the Proposed Action would gather between 800 and 2000 wild horses, contingent upon available funding, potential contract costs, and personnel constraints, during Fiscal Year (FY) 1991. Subsequent gathering operations would be conducted in future years (within the limitations imposed by funding and personnel constraints) to achieve a wild horse population capable of remaining in a thriving natural ecologic balance with the environment. Rangeland monitoring and wild horse census data would be used to evaluate the adequacy of that population size over the long-term.

The wild horses would be gathered using water and/or a helicopter and portable wing traps, with initial gathering operations expected to take place beginning about April 1, 1991 and lasting approximately 4-12 weeks. Since perennial water sources are limited on the Nellis Air Force Range, water trapping of wild horses has been used successfully in prior gathers within this area. This method is also easier on the horses and more cost effective than other procedures. Water trapping would, thus, be used as the preferred and primary gathering technique.

It is estimated that temporary traps, encompassing less than 1 acre each, would be constructed at water sources within the gather area. Temporary trap and corral sites (maximum of seven sites) would be located near water sources (Appendix 1). These sites would be selected by the contractor/BLM round-up crew depending upon how the gather is administered. All proposed sites would be culturally and biologically cleared by qualified BLM specialists prior to establishing trap facilities. Locations would be eliminated from consideration if significant cultural properties or sensitive biological values are identified within the area of the proposed trap site.

Each facility would be constructed from portable pipe panels. These traps would be moved as needed during the gathering operation and be completely removed from the area after the operation is completed.

If water trapping proves to be unsuccessful due to weather conditions or other unforeseen circumstances, a helicopter would be employed. A contracted helicopter and experienced wranglers would be used to drive and direct horses to each trap site in an efficient and careful manner. Hazards such as cliffs, fences, and old mine shafts would be scouted in advance and avoided.

the Proposed Action. Continuing evaluations would be made of monitoring data, in order to determine if the wild horse population is being maintained in a thriving ecological balance within the gather area.

Alternatives

Other alternatives, as well as different methods of capturing wild horses, are discussed in the Alternatives section of this environmental assessment. Current economic and political constraints limit "technically feasible and reasonably available" alternatives which could be expected to attain the objectives of the proposed action.

Alternative I - No Action

Under the No Action alternative, no gathering operations would be conducted and no wild horses would be gathered and removed from the Nellis Air Force Range.

Other Alternatives Considered

Gathering Wild Horses by Running Them on Horseback

Using horseback riders to trap wild horses is not feasible since wild horses scatter while being herded towards the trap. Injuries to both people and horses are more common and the cost factor, as demonstrated by previous gathers, is prohibitive for this method. Therefore this alternative will not be considered further.

Supplemental Feed and Water

Hauling feed and water for the long term is uneconomical and beyond the intent of the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act. Supplementing feed and water would not maintain the horses in a thriving natural ecological balance with their environment. Horse populations could climb to artificially high numbers, resulting in further habitat degradation. Thus, this alternative is eliminated from further consideration.

Developing Water Sources

Historically, all known spring sources on the Nellis Air Force Range have been developed. Several spring sources have been redeveloped with others planned in the future. Insufficient hydrological data are available at this time to ascertain if well drilling is feasible for other areas within the Nellis Air Force Range. It is unknown how such drilling would affect the primary (military) use of the area. If determined feasible, water development projects could require a minimum of 3 years before implementation. Therefore, this alternative was considered and rejected from further analysis because it would not resolve the resource issue in a timely manner.

Existing roads and trails would be used whenever possible to haul animals from the trap site to the sorting corrals. Horses held at the trap site in excess of 10 hours would have food and water provided. Animals would not be shipped until their condition/health was satisfactory as determined by BLM personnel.

Horses would normally be truck-hauled to temporary holding facilities in Palomino Valley, Nevada for processing. If situations arise in which the ability of the Palomino facility cannot adequately administratively process the wild horses captured, then other Bureau Placement Centers may be utilized. The wild horses would then be shipped to distribution centers for adoption.

Branded trespass horses or other claimed horses and their current year's offspring would be impounded and held until trespass fees, gathering fees and other associated costs, as determined by the Caliente Area Manager, are paid to the Bureau. These animals then would be turned over to the owner. Branded horses not claimed would be treated under the State of Nevada estray laws.

Applicable Standard Operating Procedures

These standard operating procedures (SOP's) are also part of the Proposed Action:

1. Horse handling will be kept to a minimum. Horses will normally not be kept within the traps or corrals for more than 1 day, unless approved by the Authorized Officer. The number of horses to be held may vary depending on how many are caught in any one area. Horses may be held longer than 1 day, dependent upon shipping schedules, number of horses captured, or other unforeseen circumstances.
2. A veterinarian will be on call during gathering operations.
3. Every effort will be made to keep mares and their young foals together. If a mare and foal become separated and cannot be reunited, the captured animal will be released.
4. Trap sites or holding corrals will not be placed in areas of any known listed or proposed threatened or endangered plant or animal species.
5. Temporary traps and corrals will be removed and sites will be left clean of all debris within 30 days following the gathering operation.
6. No traps or holding corrals will be established within WSA's and motorized vehicles will be confined to existing roads and ways.

7. No helicopter gathering will be allowed during the foaling season, between March 1 and July 1, because of the potential stress to pregnant and lactating mares and the possibility of induced abortions.
8. If a helicopter is used, horses will not be run more than 10 miles nor faster than 20 miles per hour during gathering operations and gathering will be conducted in the early morning and early evening to avoid overheating the horses during hot weather.
9. Helicopters will be used with caution. A qualified District BLM Contracting Officer's Representative/Project Inspector (COR/PI)¹ will be present during gathering attempts to ensure strict compliance with the above mileage limitations and 43 CFR Part 4700 regulations. The COR/PI, if contracted, or BLM personnel directing the capture will make careful determination of a boundary line to serve as an outer limit within which attempts will be made to herd horses to a given trap. Topography, distance, weather, and current conditions of the horses will be considered in setting the mileage limits so as to avoid undue stress on the horses while the horses are being herded. The COR/PI will be present at the gathering site to ensure minimum injury and other traumatic effects that could occur to the horses.
10. Captured horses that are obviously lame, deformed, or sick will be humanely disposed of at the trap site.
11. Wherever possible, helicopter gathering will avoid areas of high concentrations of mule deer and antelope to avoid stressing these animals.
12. Water traps will be left open at the completion of each day's capture operation to allow wildlife access to water.

Gather Plan and Rangeland Monitoring

The Contracting Officer's Representative (COR/PI) would continuously monitor the gather operation to ensure that all conditions and stipulations in this EA are met. The project area would be cleaned up (trash and debris) prior to release of the contractor. The temporary traps and holding corrals would be removed by the contractor within 30 days following completion.

Monitoring of wild horse numbers and rangeland conditions would continue on the Nellis Air Force Range at regular intervals, as established by the HMAP, to evaluate the impacts of implementing

¹ If capture is done by a contractor, the COR will direct the capture. If done by BLM personnel, the capture will be supervised by the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Specialist.

Range Seeding

The Conservation Plantings for Rangeland, Windbreaks, Wildlife, Soil, Conservation Cover (1978) recommends no species for planting in areas that receive less than 8 inches of precipitation. Average precipitation on the Nellis Air Force Range is 6 inches per year, making the probability of a successful seeding slight. Failed range seedings give undesirable plants (noxious weed and poisonous plants) an opportunity to establish. Once established, it is very difficult and costly to remove them. Thus this alternative is not considered.

DESCRIPTION OF AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A general description of the affected environment can be found in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Withdrawal of the Nellis Air Force Bombing Range, Nye, Clark, and Lincoln Counties, Nevada (U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management and USAF, 1981) and the Nellis Air Force Range Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management 1989). These documents are maintained in the BLM Las Vegas District Office and Caliente Resource Area office. Certain elements of the affected environment, necessary for the understanding of the anticipated impacts, are described in the Environmental Consequences analysis of this document.

The proposed gather area is shown in Appendix I. No livestock grazing is authorized within the Nellis Air Force Range nor has any been authorized since 1979. Pronghorn antelope and mule deer are the major big game species located within the proposed gather area.

The July 1989 actual count census counted 6,255 wild horses on the Nellis Air Force Range. The August 1990 actual count censused 4,302 horses. A total of 683 wild horses were removed under an emergency gather in 1989. A documented death loss of 48 horses occurred between the census activities in 1989 and 1990. Large numbers of wild horses roam freely throughout the Nellis Air Force Range, often in close proximity to military and related activities.

Consistent monitoring of perennial water sources in 1990 indicated that sufficient perennial water exists to support between 1,100 and 1,200 wild horses on the Nellis Air Force Range, while maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance between horses and their environment. Table 1 identifies perennial water sources, rate of flow and number of horses capable of being maintained in 1990.

Table 1. Known Perennial Water Sources and Number of Wild Horses Supported (1990).

SPRING SOURCE	RATE OF FLOW	HORSE NUMBERS SUPPORTED
Cliff Spring	2 gal/min*	288
Cedar Well	0.19 gal/min	25
Rose Spring	2 gal/min	288
Silver Bow	1 gal/min*	144
Silver Bow Trough	1 gal/min	144
Tunnel Spring	0.09 gal/min	13
Corral Spring	0.48 gal/min	70
Harleys Spring	1 gal/min*	144
Cedar Pass Spring	0.125 gal/min*	18
Cactus Spring	1.5 gal/min	216
Antelope Spring	0.75 gal/min	108
10.1 gal/min		Total = 1458

*Estimated Rate of Flow

It should be noted that this number, 1458, assumes 100 percent water consumption by wild horses without allowance for wildlife consumption and evaporative loss.

During 1990, 48 wild horses have been documented to have died during periods when ephemeral water was unavailable. The total number of horses that have died of thirst during 1990 is unknown. Many more horses would have died had the U.S. Air Force and BLM not supplemented the existing perennial water supply by hauling approximately 240,000 gallons between July 6, 1990 and December 13, 1990.

Continued drought conditions have resulted in flow rate reductions for perennial sources. As of January 1991 Tunnel and Cliff Springs have been documented to have ceased flowing. Documented flow rates at other spring sources continue to drop. Rose Spring flow rates have dropped from 2 gallons per minute (gpm), 1990, to 1.5 gpm, 1991, and at Silver Bow Spring, flow rates have dropped from 1 gpm, 1990, to 0.5 gpm, 1991. As current drought conditions continue into the summer months, flow rates are expected to continue to decrease.

In 1989, heavy utilization on key forage plants was recorded at distances 15 miles away from perennial water sources. Utilization was recorded at 65 percent (heavy) on Indian ricegrass (*Oryzopsis hymenoides*) and 70 percent (heavy) on winter fat (*Ceratoides lanata*). Both levels are above the allowable use level of 50 percent recommended for areas that receive yearlong grazing.

Increased dust has reduced visibility within the Nellis Air Force Range during the last decade. This dust decreases the effectiveness of certain optical testing conducted within the Nellis Air

Force Range. The increase in dust is attributable to the trailing of increasing wild horse populations and subsequent removal and degradation of vegetative cover.

Management of wild horses within the Nellis Air Force Range is controversial. Extensive public interest and involvement has been directed toward BLM wild horse management in the Nellis Air Force Range. The BLM has been involved in wild horse related litigation and protests since 1987. Gathering of wild horses during this period has been curtailed.

The Department of Energy (DOE), United States Air Force (USAF), and Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) have requested that the Bureau of Land Management gather excess wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range. The proposed action is also supported by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Wild Horse Organized Assistance, and the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board. The Commission for Preservation of Wild Horses and Burros supports the proposed gather on condition that the gather not jeopardize the standing of their protest.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Mandatory Elements

There would be no impacts from the Proposed Action or Alternative I - No Action to threatened or endangered species (plants and animals); floodplains; wetlands; areas of critical environmental concern; wild and scenic rivers; visual resource management; prime or unique farmlands; wilderness; water quality; or cultural, paleontological and historical resource values.

The following programs would not be impacted by the Proposed Action or Alternative I-No Action: minerals, land uses, recreation, range (livestock), and forestry.

WILD HORSES:

Proposed Action

The standard operating procedures would minimize the negative impacts from gathering and help insure humane treatment and safe handling of the wild horses during capture, care, temporary holding, and transportation to BLM adoption preparation facilities. Regardless of the capture method used, wild horses would experience stress due to capture operations.

Sufficient numbers of wild horses would remain within the gather area to maintain viable herds and to provide for interaction between bands. Reduced competition between wild horses and wildlife for forage, water, cover, and living space would improve the physical condition and survival rates of the wild horses. Managing the wild horses at a level based on the available supply of perennial water and forage would help maintain the natural thriving ecological balance of the area. Biological information

obtained from the gathered animals (sex and age ratios, parasites, diseases, etc.) would also be useful in future wild horse management.

Based upon prior capture experience, death loss would not exceed 2 percent of the horses captured at the trap site.

Water Trapping

Water trapping has proven to be the least stressful gathering method. The possibility exists that wild horses could sustain injury during gathering operations due to panic behavior.

Helicopter Trapping

The use of helicopters to capture excess wild horses might result in abandoned foals and split bands, as well as injured horses. Removal operations might also disrupt band structure either temporarily or permanently.

Alternative I - No Action

Under Alternative I - No Action, wild horses would continue to die when ephemeral water is unavailable. Degradation of horse habitat would continue, eventually culminating in death by starvation for many wild horses. Horse condition would deteriorate, possibly permitting diseases and/or parasites to further weaken entire herds. In the event of a large die-off, the carcasses would become a breeding ground for flies and other disease vectors, possibly infecting the remaining horse population. Wild horse survival rates would continue to drop, with a disruption of age-class structure in the horse population.

SOILS:

Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, soil compaction would occur at the trap and holding corral sites as a result of horse concentrations during gathering operations. Impacts would be insignificant within the 760,000 acre proposed gather area (Appendix I) within the Nellis Air Force Range since the impacted locations would be small (1-2 acres in size) and the gather period of short duration. Range-wide areas which presently exhibit soil erosion and compaction would be positively affected by the reduction of wild horse numbers and decreased trampling effects.

Vegetative cover has a direct influence on the erosion potential of soils. Reduced wild horse numbers would decrease vegetative utilization, benefitting soils in both the short and long-term. These beneficial responses (less soil compaction and improved vegetation production potential) would be most important in heavy horse use areas.

Alternative I-No Action

Under this alternative, areas of soil erosion and compaction would increase as the wild horse population grows. Vegetation utilization would accelerate, reducing vegetative cover and exposing more soil area to wind and water erosion. Over time, soil erosion would minimize those portions of the Nellis Air Force Range capable of supporting vegetation.

VEGETATION:

Proposed Action

Vegetation at the trap sites and holding corrals would sustain a negative impact from trampling by wild horses concentrated at those locations. This would total approximately 1-2 acres at each site, in relation to the 760,000 acre gather area. Vegetative regeneration would be expected to occur within 2 to 3 years, depending on climatic conditions.

The removal of excess wild horses would have a positive long-term affect on the vegetative community of the area. The ecological condition of the different plant communities would improve after the gather operations and with reduced utilization occurring on the desirable grasses and shrubs. Over time, production of these species would increase, as would their percentage of composition within the vegetation community.

Alternative I-No Action

Under Alternative I - No Action, heavy utilization would continue on the desirable grasses and shrubs. These plants would eventually disappear from the community and be replaced by undesirable plants (noxious weeds, poisonous plants). Such succession would reduce the amount of available forage for wild horses and wildlife species.

WILDLIFE:

Proposed Action

A short term impact to wildlife is expected under the Proposed Action as a result of gathering operations. Some animals could be temporarily frightened or displaced from water sources and adjacent areas during the removals.

Wildlife would benefit from reduced herbivore competition around waters and throughout the Nellis Air Force Range. Lessened competition for this critical resource would improve reproduction and survival rates of among wildlife species, especially mule deer and antelope. In time, reduced herbivore competition would allow an increase in available forage for wildlife.

Alternative I-No Action

Under the No Action alternative, competition between wildlife and wild horses for critical resources would continue and intensify.

Reproduction and survival rates for wildlife would decrease, as wild horse populations increase reducing water and forage availability for other herbivores. Mule deer and antelope populations may be significantly reduced on the Nellis Air Force Range.

AIR QUALITY:

Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, short-term increases in transient dust levels would result from the operation of ground vehicles during the gathering and handling of wild horses. These would be localized impacts within the 760,000 acre proposed gather area and would dissipate quickly at the conclusion of the gathering activities.

Air quality over the long-term would improve with a reduction in range-wide dust levels as fewer horses trail to water. Reduced numbers would allow vegetative cover and frequency to increase, reducing potential for wind erosion.

Alternative I-No Action

There would be a continued increase in the transient dust levels as wild horses move around the Nellis Air Force Range. As a result, certain defense-related optical testing opportunities would be diminished within portions of the Nellis Range.

SOCIO-ECONOMICS:

Proposed Action

If the public reaches a consensus opinion, there would be no controversy. Failing a consensus, litigation could result perhaps delaying gathering operations. A decision to continue hauling water during that period would require the expenditure of additional tax dollars.

Alternative I-No Action Alternative

If no horses are gathered, the wild horse population would continue to increase in the short-term, creating potential conflicts with USAF and DOE activities on the Nellis Air Force Range. Vehicle accidents and interference with military operations would increase in frequency.

In the long-term, when the wild horse population suffers a major die-off, large numbers of dead horses would exceed the capacity of the arid ecosystem to rapidly dispose of the physical remains. The carcasses would require burial to avoid health and safety

hazards to range personnel.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Proposed Action

The net cumulative impacts of the Proposed Action would benefit natural resources on the Nellis Air Force Range by maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance between wild horses and their environment. The removal of wild horses would reduce negative impacts to vegetation and soils by decreasing utilization levels approximately 50 percent. A reduction in wild horse numbers would lessen soil compaction and erosion potential, aid desirable plant regeneration, and make more forage available for wild horses and wildlife. Areas of heavy utilization would be expected to decrease from 15 miles to 5-10 miles around perennial water sources. The amount of water available to wildlife would also increase at all water sources within the Nellis Air Force Range.

Alternative I-No Action

Under Alternative I- No Action, cumulative impacts would be related to the effects of an excess number of wild horses on the Nellis Air Force Range environment. A total of 1,784,000 acres (81 percent of the Nellis Air Force Range) would continue to degrade in ecological condition as wild horse numbers increase and herds expand their range in search of water and forage. Ranging from one-quarter mile to one mile of perennial water sources, perennial grasses and forbs would be severely grazed. At distances from one-quarter mile to 15 miles away from these sources, heavy grazing would occur. Ungrazed vegetation would be trampled and soils compacted, preventing the regeneration of vegetation and lowering ecological condition to an early or mid seral stage.

Existing riparian vegetation at perennial springs and along Breen Creek (an estimated total of 250 acres) would continue to be eliminated in those areas where wild horses have access to the water sources. The loss of this important riparian habitat would negatively impact wildlife populations on the Nellis Air Force Range. In the long-term, competition for forage and water would result in diminished wildlife populations.

Wild horse exposure to unnatural hazards would also increase. Vehicular traffic-related accidents within the main access routes would kill or injure an estimated 50 horses annually. An equal number of wild horse deaths would occur as a result of increasing contacts with potentially hazardous or lethal substances.

IRREVERSIBLE AND IRRETRIEVABLE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES

No irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources is anticipated to occur under the Proposed Action or Alternative I - No Action.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Intensity of Public Interest

Public notification was given prior to the preparation of the Environmental Assessment and Removal Plan. Public comments were solicited for the period of June 3 through June 21, 1990 (Appendix II).

The U. S. Air Force, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nevada Department of Agriculture, Nevada Department of Wildlife, Nevada Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses, Animal Protection Institute, International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros, Wild Horse Organized Assistance, Humane Society of the United States, American Horse Protection Association, and Delamar Valley Cattle made written comments to the draft EA and Removal Plan.

Comments that were applicable to the adequacy of this document were incorporated. Comments and opinions applicable to the final decision will be given consideration.

Review

BLM Personnel:

Dawna Ferris	Archeologist/Environmental Coordinator, Caliente Resource Area.
Jule Durfee	Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, Caliente Resource Area
Larry Lacey	Surface Protection Specialist, Caliente Resource Area
Cory Bodman	Soil Scientist, Caliente Resource Area
Marc Pierce	Forester, Caliente Resource Area
Terry Lee Smith	Range Conservationist, Caliente Resource Area
Kyle Teel	Wildlife Biologist, Caliente Resource Area
Tim Murphy	Supervisory Range Conservationist, Caliente Resource Area
Curtis Tucker	Area Manager, Caliente Resource Area
Bob Stager	Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, Las Vegas District Office

Milton Frei

Wild Horse and Burro Specialist,
Nevada State Office

Terry Woosley

Chief, Branch of Biological Resources,
Nevada State Office

Daniel C. B. Rathbun

Deputy State Director, Lands and
Renewable Resources, Nevada State Office

Signatures

Prepared by:

Julie Durfee

Julie Durfee
Wild Horse and Burro Specialist
Caliente Resource Area

2-15-91

Date

Reviewed by:

Dawna E. Ferris

Dawna Ferris
Environmental Coordinator
Caliente Resource Area

2-15-91

Date

Curtis G. Tucker

Curtis G. Tucker, Area Manager
Caliente Resource Area
Las Vegas District

2-15-91

Date

Project: Nellis Wild Horse Gather Plan
EAs NV-055-00-22
NV-055.147

DECISION RECORD/RATIONAL AND FONSI

The proposed action is to remove 800 - 2,000 wild horses (consistent with available funding) from the Nellis Air Force Range. Evaluation of monitoring data shows that insufficient perennial water exists to support the current population of wild horses. Wild horses are not in a thriving natural ecological balance with their environment.

The proposed action as described in the Environmental Assessment (NV-055-00-22) has been found to have no significant environmental impacts on the human environment when conducted with the mitigation provided. No Environmental Impact Statement is required.

All actions are in compliance with P.L. 95-195 and the Bureau of Land Management Planning Process. The State Clearing House was contacted through the review and input process.

The no action alternative was addressed in this document, but was not selected for implementation. Under the no action alternative wild horses would not be managed in thriving natural ecological balance with their environment. This situation is out of conformance with Bureau regulations and Public Law 92-195, the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971, as amended.

I hereby recommend adoption of the proposed action as stated in the environmental assessment (NV-055-00-22) with the identified mitigation and stipulations.

Dawna E. Ferris
Dawna Ferris
Environmental Coordinator

2-15-91
Date

Curtis G. Tucker
Curtis G. Tucker
Area Manager
Caliente Resource Area

2-15-91
Date

I hereby select and approve the proposed action as stated in the environmental assessment with the identified mitigation and stipulations.

Ben F. Collins
Ben F. Collins
District Manager
Las Vegas District Office

FEB 10 1991
Date

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REMOVAL PLAN FOR
NELLIS AIR FORCE RANGE

Prepared by Jule Durfee
Wild Horse and Burro Specialist

Bureau of Land Management
Las Vegas District
Caliente Resource Area
Caliente, Nevada

DRAFT

Removal Plan for Nellis Air Force Range Wild Horse Removal

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE OF REMOVAL

The purpose of this removal is to lower wild horse populations to achieve a closer balance between available water and forage resources. The removal will reduce further deterioration of the rangeland resources. This plan is not intended to establish an appropriate management level or achieve a thriving natural ecological balance. In addition, the boundary of the Nevada Wild Horse Range and the area used by wild horses in 1971 is not addressed in this plan. These issues will be decided through the protests to the Nellis Resource Plan (January 1990).

This document outlines the process and the events involved with the wild horse removal operation for the Nellis Air Force Range Complex. Included are the numbers of horses to be removed, the time and method of capture, the handling and disposition of captured horses and the BLM personnel involved with the removal.

B. LOCATION

The Nellis Air Force Range is located in Clark, Lincoln and Nye counties of southern Nevada. The removal area is centered in the northwestern portion of the Nellis Air Force Range. Appendix I identifies the removal area.

Topographically, the removal area ranges from flat valley bottoms to steep, mountainous terrain. Wild horses are anticipated to be found at all elevations during the removal period, although past utilization and distribution patterns indicate that they may be found congregated in the valley bottoms. There are few physical barriers and fences in the area and these areas will be avoided.

C. BACKGROUND

2. ~~1.~~ Objectives

- a. To avoid or eliminate conflict with military use of the Nellis Range Complex in accordance with P.L. 99-606.
- b. To achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance in accordance with P.L. 92-195.
- c. To protect and manage wild free roaming horses in accordance with P.L. 92-195.
- d. To prevent deterioration on the rangeland resources in accordance with various statutes.
- e. To reduce acreage in severe utilization category and improve ecological condition.

1. ~~2.~~ Situation & Supporting Data

Reverse

During July 1989, 6,255 horses were counted within the Nellis Air Force Range. In December 1989, after below normal availability of drinking water within the removal area, the BLM conducted a removal involving 683 horses. A wild horse census conducted in August 1990 counted 4,302 within the removal area. Current estimates place the population at approximately in excess of 4000 adult wild horses within the removal area.

An analysis of water monitoring data indicates that sufficient perennial water exists to support between 1100 and 1200 wild horses. Water tables measured in two locations indicates a significant drop in the water table.

An analysis of forage monitoring data indicates approximately 442,755 acres of the removal area in the severe utilization category.

Increase in dust due trailing and reduced vegetative cover has decreased visibility and the effectiveness of military uses including defense optical testing conducted within the removal area.

In summary, data indicates the existing water and forage within the removal area can not support the current population of wild horse, deterioration of the range is occurring, and a thriving natural ecological balance does not exist. Although this plan will remove no more than 2000 wild horses and will leave in excess of 2000 wild horses, ecological condition objectives may not be met. Subsequent population adjustments may be necessary to reach a thriving natural ecological balance and to meet all objectives.

II. REMOVAL PROCESS

All CAPS

A. Administration of the Gather

Water trapping will be used to capture no more than 2000 wild horses beginning after April 22. If necessary a helicopter may be used to supplement operations after July 1. The entire operation is not expected to exceed approximately 12 weeks. Subsequent removals will be based on additional monitoring data and be the subject of a future removal plan.

This removal will be conducted through the Nevada East Wild Horse/Burro Removal Requirements Contract (N651-C1-3018) or through the FY91 equivalent requirements contract. The removal will be supervised by a Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) and a Project Inspector (PI). Sorting operations will be supervised by COR/PI. Aging operations will be conducted by Bureau personnel. All stipulations contained in this removal plan and the contract will apply. Through either it's own personnel or the contractor the BLM will be responsible for the capture, care, sorting, temporary holding and transportation from the removal area of all wild horses.

Two weeks prior to the start of the removal, BLM will provide a precapture evaluation of existing conditions in the removal area. The evaluation will include animal condition, prevailing temperatures, soil conditions, topography, road conditions, locations of fences and other physical barriers, water availability, and animal distribution in relation to potential trap locations.

The evaluation will also conclude whether the level of activity associated with the removal operation is likely to cause undue stress to the animals. A determination will be made as to whether such stress could be tolerated by the horses if a veterinarian is utilized or whether a delay in the capture activity is warranted. If it is determined the removal can proceed with a veterinarian present, the services of a veterinarian will be obtained before the removal proceeds.

It is estimated that no more than seven trap locations (Appendix I) will be required to accomplish the work. Potential trap sites include Willow Spring, Rose Spring Pipeline, Silver Bow Spring, Corral Spring, Tunnel Spring, Cactus Spring and Cedar Well. Potential trap sites occur on or near existing roads.

Prior to setting up traps and support facilities, cultural resource and biological assessment of these sites will be conducted by qualified BLM specialists. Trap locations exhibiting significant cultural resources or sensitive biological values will be shifted or eliminated from consideration or alternate locations selected where mitigation is possible.

B. CAPTURE

1. Time and Method

The removal will commence after April 22, 1991, when weather and wild horse conditions permit. Once the removal operation begins, it is anticipated they will last approximately twelve weeks.

Water trapping, possibly supplemented with helicopter herding after July 1, will be used to gather wild horses. If water trapping is unsuccessful, a helicopter will be used to move wild horses to trap sites, where they will be encouraged into traps.

The temporary traps and corrals will be constructed from portable pipe panels. A loading chute at the holding corral will be equipped with plywood sides or similar material so horses' legs will not get caught in the panels. Trap wings will be constructed of portable panels, jute netting, or other materials determined to be non-harmful to the horses. Barbed wire or other harmful materials will not be allowed for wing construction. All trap, corral, and wing construction will be approved by the COR/PI.

2. Number of Animals to be Removed

The number of wild horses to be removed during this removal is no more than 20,000, contingent upon available funding.

3. Number of Animals Remaining

Current population estimates indicate that there will be in excess of 4000 wild horses remaining in the removal area.

Change Page Break

C. SORTING

At each holding site, animals will be sorted into the following four categories using the criteria listed:

1. ANIMALS TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RANGE must meet the following criteria:
a. six years of age and under which are determined to be free from defects.

b. able to be shipped from processing center within six weeks of arrival.

2. Any LAME, OLD, OR SICK ANIMALS will be destroyed in accordance with 43 CFR Subpart 4730.1 using the following criteria:

a. Lame means an animal with one or more malfunctioning limbs that permanently impair freedom of movement.

b. Old means an animal characterized because of age by its physical deterioration and inability to fend for itself, suffering or closeness to death.

c. Sick means an animal with failing health, infirmity or disease from which there is little chance of recovery.

3. ANIMALS TO BE RELEASED BACK ON TO THE RANGE will be selected using the following criteria:

a. Pregnant mares.

b. Mares with foals.

c. Animals exceeding six years of age.

d. Animals without hereditary defects not meeting other criteria for destruction. An example is an animal blinded in one eye due to injury.

4. BRANDED AND CLAIMED ANIMALS will be removed from the range using the following criteria:

a. Branded animals with offspring, including yearlings.

b. Unbranded or claimed animals with offspring, including yearlings with obvious evidence of existing or former private ownership (e.g., geldings, bobbed tails, photo documentation, saddle marks, etc.).

c. Unbranded animals and offspring without obvious evidence of former private ownership.

5. Process

a. Removal. Animals meeting the removal criteria will be returned to the contractor from transport to a processing center.

b. Destruction. The COR/PI will have the primary responsibility for determining when an animal will be destroyed. Due to security restrictions involving personnel permitted to carry fire arms on the Nellis Air Force Range, Advanced Security Inc. (ASI) supervisory personnel will perform the actual destruction. When the need for destruction questionable, a veterinarian will be called to assist in making a final determination. *ASI trained in destruction?*

The carcasses of wild horses that die or must be destroyed, as a result of any infectious, contagious or parasitic disease, will be disposed of by burial to a depth of at least 3 feet. The carcasses of other wild horses which must be destroyed will be disposed of by removing them from the capture site or holding corral and placing them in a inconspicuous location to minimize the visual impacts. Carcasses will not be placed in drainage regardless of drainage size or downstream destination.

c. Release. Animals selected for release back on the range will be retained until the trap site in which they were captured is relocated and their recapture is unlikely.

d. Branded and Claimed. A Notice of Intent to Impound and 28-day Notice to Gather Wild Horses will be issued concurrently by the BLM, prior to any removal operations in this area. The Nevada Department of Agriculture and the District Brand Inspector will receive copies of these notices. The COR/PI will contact the District Brand Inspector and make arrangements for dates and times when brand inspections will be needed.

When horses are captured, the COR/PI and the District Brand Inspector will jointly inspect all animals at the holding facility in the removal area. The COR/PI, after consultation with the District Brand Inspector, will determine if unbranded animals are wild and free-roaming horses. The District Brand Inspector will identify ownership of branded animals and their offspring and, if possible, the ownership of unbranded animals determined not to be wild and free-roaming horses.

Branded horses with offspring and claimed unbranded horses with offspring for which the owners have been identified by the District Brand Inspector will be retained in the custody of the BLM in a separate holding corral. Release of these animals to the owner or claimant will be upon settlement of impoundment and or trespass charges. Appropriate charges will be determined by the Caliente Area Manager in accordance with 43 CFR Subpart 4710.6 and 43 CFR Subpart 4150. In the event settlement is not made, the horses will be sold at public auction by the BLM.

Branded horses with offspring whose owners cannot be determined, and unclaimed, unbranded horses with offspring having evidence of existing or former private ownership will be released to the Nevada Department of Agriculture (District Brand Inspector) as stray.

The District Brand Inspector will provide the COR/PI with a brand inspection certificate for the immediate shipment of wild horses to Palomino Valley Center (Reno). A similar certificate will be issued for the branded or claimed horses

for whom impoundment and trespass charges have not been offered or received in order to ship them to public auction or another holding facility.

D. HOLDING

The holding facility will be located on lands withdrawn for military purposes, with all access controlled by the United States Air Force (USAF). All requests for public access to the holding facility will be made to the Caliente Area Manager, who will then forward the request to the USAF. The Air Force will evaluate the request and grant or deny access.

The contractor will provide all feed, water, labor, and equipment to care for captured horses at the holding facility. The contractor will also provide transportation of captured horses from the temporary holding facility to the Palomino Valley Center (Reno) Nevada. BLM will provide transportation of unclaimed and claimed branded horses to an approved facility for release to the claimant or for handling under Nevada State estray laws. All work will be accomplished in a safe and humane manner and be in accordance with the provisions of 43 CFR Part 4700 and the following specifications, provisions, and attached work location maps. All labor, vehicles, helicopters, traps, troughs, feed, temporary holding facilities, and other supplies and equipment including, but not limited to the aforementioned, shall be furnished by the contractor. BLM will furnish contract supervision.

E. TRANSPORTATION

1. Wild Horses

After sorting, wild horses will be transported to PVC or possibly to the Bureau's processing center in Kingman, AZ. Transportation will be in accordance with standards in the stipulations and specifications section in this plan.

2. Branded and Claimed Horses

Branded and claimed horses will be transported off of the Range by the BLM or the Brand Inspector depending on the final disposition of the individual animals.

F. RESPONSIBILITIES

1. District Manager

The District Manager is responsible for maintaining and protecting the health and welfare of the wild horses. A COR/PI will be on site during the capture activities to ensure contractor compliance with the contract stipulations and to protect the health and welfare of the animals. In addition the COR/PI will be on site during the other handling activities to ensure compliance with applicable standards, procedures and the removal plan stipulations.

2. Area Manager

All publicity, formal public contact, and inquiries will be handled through the Caliente Resource Area Manager. The Area Manager will coordinate contacts with

Palomino Valley Center (PVC) or other handling facilities, to assure space is available, horses are handled humanely and efficiently, and are arriving from the capture site in good condition.

3. Other BLM Personnel

Prior to the removal operation attached/detailed BLM personnel will tour the removal area and look at potential trap sites. In addition they will be briefed on results of the precapture evaluation, the objectives and standards of their tasks and the removal plan stipulations.

4. Contracting Officer's Representative and Project Inspector

The COR/PI will be directly responsible for conducting the removal including supervision other attached/detailed BLM personnel and the Contractor. The COR/PI is also responsible for reporting the proceedings to the Caliente Resource Area Manager, Las Vegas District Manager, the State Director's representative and the Contracting Officer.

The COR/PI, through on-site observation, will evaluate the contractor's ability to perform the required work in accordance with the contract stipulations. Compliance with the contract stipulations will be facilitated through issuance of written instruction to the contractor, stop work orders, and default procedures should the contractor not perform work according to stipulations.

5. Contractor

The contractor will be briefed on his duties and responsibilities before the Notice to Proceed is issued. An inspection of the contractor's equipment at this time will be conducted to insure all items meet required specifications. Any equipment that does not meet specifications must be replaced within 36 hours. The contractor will be informed of the terrain involved, animal condition, road conditions, potential trap locations, water availability and the presence of fences and other dangerous barriers.

III. STIPULATIONS AND SPECIFICATIONS

CAPs →

A. Motorized Equipment

1. All motorized equipment employed in the transportation of captured animals shall be in compliance with appropriate State and Federal laws and regulations applicable to the humane transportation of animals.

2. Vehicles will be in good repair, of adequate rated capacity, and operated so as to insure that captured animals are transported without undue risk or injury.

3. Only stock trailers will be allowed for transporting animals from traps to temporary holding facilities. Only Bobtail trucks, stock trailers, or single deck trucks will be used to haul animals from temporary holding facilities to final destination. Sides or stockracks of transporting vehicles will be a minimum height of 6 feet 6 inches from vehicle floor. Single deck trucks with

trailers 40 feet or longer will have two partition gates to separate animals. Trailers less than 40 feet will have at least one partition gate to separate the animals. Each partition shall be a minimum of 6 feet high and shall have a minimum 5 foot wide swinging gate. The use of double deck trailers is unacceptable and will not be allowed.

4. All vehicles used to transport animals to final destination will be equipped with at least one door at the rear end of the vehicle which is capable of sliding either horizontally or vertically.

5. Floors of vehicles and the loading chute will be covered and maintained with a non-skid surface such as sand, mineral soil or wood shavings, to prevent the animals from slipping. This will be confirmed by the COR/PI prior to each loading.

6. Animals to be loaded and transported in any vehicle will be as directed by the COR/PI and may include limitations on numbers according to age, size, sex, temperament, and animal condition. A minimum of 1.4 linear foot per adult animal and .75 linear foot per foal will be allowed per standard 8 foot wide stock trailer/truck.

The COR/PI will supervise the loading of the wild horses to be transported from the trap to the temporary holding corral. The COR/PI will require separation of small foals and/or weak horses from the rest should there be a potential for injury during the trip. The COR/PI will consider the distance and condition of the road and animals in making this determination. Horses shipped from the temporary holding corral to the PVC will normally be separated by studs, mares and foals (including small yearlings). However, if the numbers of these classes of animals are too few in one compartment and too many in another, animals may be shifted between compartments to properly distribute the animals in the trailer. This may include placing a younger, lighter stud with the mares or a weak mare with the foals. Further separation may be required should condition of the animals warrant.

The COR/PI supervising the loading will exercise authority to off-load animals should there be too many horses on the trailer/truck.

7. The COR/PI will consider the condition of the animals, weather conditions, type of vehicles, distance to be transported, or other factors when planning for the movement of captured animals. The COR/PI will provide for any brand and/or inspection services required for the captured animals.

It is currently planned to ship all horses to the Palomino Valley Center. Palomino Valley Center personnel involved in off-loading the horses will provide feedback to the COR/PI on the condition of shipped horses. Should problems arise, shipping methods, and/or separation of the horses will be changed in an attempt to alleviate the problems.

8. If the COR/PI determines that dust conditions are such that the animals could be endangered during transportation, the round-up crew will be instructed to adjust speed. The maximum distance over which animals may have to be transported on dirt roads is approximately 30 miles per load. Periodic checks

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

B. Trapping and Care

1. All capture attempts will be accomplished by water trapping and/or the utilization of a helicopter. A minimum of one saddle horse will be immediately available at the trap site to accomplish roping if necessary. Roping will be done as determined by the COR/PI and under no circumstances will animals be tied down for more than 1 hour. Roping will be allowed only to capture an orphaned foal or a suspected wet mare.

2. The helicopter will be used in such a manner to insure that bands or herds will remain together and that foals are not be left behind. The Las Vegas District may use an observation helicopter as a means in which to supervise the use of the project helicopter. In the absence of an observation helicopter, the project helicopter or saddle horses may be used to place a BLM observer on a point overlooking the area of the helicopter herding operations.

3. The rate of movement and distance the animals travel will not exceed limitations set by the COR/PI who will consider terrain, physical barriers, weather, condition of the animals, and other factors.

BLM will not allow horses to be herded more than 10 miles nor faster than 20 miles per hour. The COR/PI may decrease the rate of travel or distance moved should the route to the trap site pose a danger or cause avoidable stress (steep and/or rocky). Animal condition will also be considered in making distance and speed restrictions.

Temperature limitations on helicopter operations are 10 degrees F. as a minimum and 95 degrees F. as a maximum. Special attention will be given to avoiding physical hazards such as fences.

4. It is estimated that a maximum of seven trap locations will be required to accomplish the work.

5. All traps, wings, and holding facilities will be constructed, maintained and operated to handle the animals in a safe and humane manner and be in accordance with the following:

a. Traps and holding facilities will be constructed of portable panels, the top of which shall not be less than 72 inches high, and the bottom rail of which will not be more than 12 inches from ground level. All traps and holding facilities will be oval or round in design.

b. All loading chute sides will be fully covered with plywood or like material. The loading chute will also be a minimum of 6 feet high.

c. All runways will be a minimum of 20 feet long and a minimum of 6 feet high and will be covered with plywood or like material a minimum of 1 foot to 5 feet above ground level.

d. Wings will not be constructed out of barbed wire or other materials injurious to animals and must be approved by the COR/PI.

e. All crowding pens including the gates leading to the runways will be covered with a material which prevents the animals from seeing out (plywood, burlap, etc.) and will be covered a minimum of 1 foot to 5 feet above ground level. Eight linear feet of this material will be capable of being removed or let down to provide a viewing window.

f. All pens and runways used for the movement and handling of animals will be connected with hinged self-locking gates.

6. No fence modification will be made without authorization from the COR/PI. The round-up crew will be responsible for restoration of any fence modification which needs to be made.

If the route by which the contractor wishes to herd horses passes through a fence, the contractor will be required to roll up the fencing material and pull up the posts to provide at least one-eighth mile of gap. The standing fence on each side of the gap will be well-flagged for a distance of 300 yards from the gap on each side.

7. When dust conditions occur within or adjacent to the trap or holding facility, the contractor will be required to wet down the ground with water.

8. Alternate pens, within the holding facility will be furnished by the contractor to separate mares with small foals, sick and injured animals, and stray animals from the other horses. Animals will be sorted as to age, number, size, temperament, sex, and condition when in the holding facility so as to minimize, to the extent possible, injury due to fighting and trampling.

9. Shipment of animals will be scheduled to arrive at final destination between 6:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Every effort will be made to ensure that the time horses are standing on the trucks prior to off loading is minimized. No shipments will be scheduled to arrive at final destination on Sunday.

10. Animals held in the traps and/or holding facilities will be provided with a continuous supply of fresh clean water at a minimum rate of 10 gallons per animal per day. Animals held for 10 hours or more in the traps or holding facilities will be provided good quality hay at the rate of not less than 2 pounds of hay per 100 pounds of estimated body weight per day. A minimum of 400 square feet of space will be provided for each animal (mare and foal=two animals) to be held in excess of ten hours.

11. Security to prevent loss, injury or death of captured animals at the capture site will be the responsibility of the contractor until delivery to final destination.

Security at the holding facility will be the responsibility of the BLM.

12. The contractor will restrain sick or injured animals if treatment is necessary. The COR/PI will determine if injured animals must be destroyed and provide for destruction of such animals. The contractor may be required to dispose of the carcasses as directed by the COR/PI.

13. The contractor will leave water traps open at the completion of each day's capture operation to allow wildlife access to water.

C. Helicopter, Pilot, and Communications

1. The contractor must operate in compliance with Federal Aviation Regulations, Part 91. Pilots provided by the contractor will comply with the Contractor's Federal Aviation Certificates, applicable regulations of the State of Nevada, and will follow what are recognized as safe flying practices.

2. When refueling, the helicopter will remain a distance of at least a 1,000 feet or more from animals, vehicles (other than fuel truck), and personnel not involved in refueling.

3. The COR/PI will have the means to communicate with the Contractor's pilot and be able to direct the use of the removal helicopter at all times. If communications cannot be established, the BLM will take steps as necessary to protect the welfare of the animals. The frequency(s) used for this contract will be assigned.

4. The contractor will obtain the necessary FCC licenses for the radio system.

5. The proper operation, service, and maintenance of all contractor furnished helicopters is the responsibility of the contractor. The BLM reserves the right to remove from service pilots and helicopters which, in the opinion of the contracting officer or COR/PI, violate contract rules, are unsafe, or otherwise unsatisfactory. In this event, the contractor will be notified in writing to furnish replacement pilots or helicopters within 48 hours of notification. All such replacements must be approved in advance of operation by the contracting officer or his representatives.

D. Contractor-Furnished Property

1. All hay, water, vehicles, saddle horses, helicopters and other equipment will be provided by the contractor. Other equipment includes, but is not limited to, a minimum of 1,500 linear feet of 72-inch high (minimum height) panels for traps and holding facilities. Separate water troughs will be provided at each pen where animals are being held.

2. The contractor will furnish an avionics system that will allow communications between the contractor's helicopter and his fuel truck.

3. The contractor will furnish a VHF/AM radio transceiver in the contractor's helicopter which has the capability to operate on a frequency of 122.925 MHz.

4. The contractor will provide a programmable VHF/FM radio transceiver in the contractor's helicopter to accommodate the COR/PI in monitoring the removal operation.

III. FOLLOWUP MONITORING

During and upon completion of removal, ^{the BLM will continue to} ~~monitoring of~~ the wild horse herd, the water sources, ^{and} the vegetation ~~by BLM will continue~~ to determine the degree to which objectives are being met. Future actions will be based on the results of this monitoring information.

IV. SIGNATURES

Prepared by:

Jule Durfee
Wild Horse and Burro Specialist
Caliente Resource Area

Date

Reviewed by:

Curtis G. Tucker
Area Manager
Caliente Resource Area

Date

Approved by:

Ben F. Collins
District Manager
Las Vegas District Office

Date

DRAFT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
for the
NELLIS AIR FORCE RANGE WILD
HORSE REMOVAL

EA No. NV-055-00-22

Prepared by Jule Durfee
Wild Horse and Burro Specialist

Bureau of Land Management
Las Vegas District
Caliente Resource Area
Caliente, Nevada

DRAFT

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT for the NELLIS AIR FORCE RANGE WILD HORSE REMOVAL

I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Las Vegas District, Caliente Resource Area, proposes to remove excess wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range. The proposed removal area is within the Nellis Air Force Range military withdrawal lands, located in Clark, Lincoln and Nye counties of southern Nevada (see Appendix I- Location Maps).

B. PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this proposed removal is to lower wild horse populations to achieve a closer balance between available water and forage resources. The proposed removal will reduce further deterioration of the rangeland resources.

C. RELATIONSHIP TO PLANNING

The Nellis Air Force Range Resource Plan/Final EIS (U.S. DOI, BLM 1990) is currently under protest. The Bureau recognizes the protest to this plan, specifically the points of protest addressing the Nevada Wild Horse Range (NWHR) boundary and the 1971 use area. These issues will be decided through the protests. Final determination of these protests will not alter the data which demonstrate that insufficient water and forage are available to support the existing wild horse population.

The proposed plan is not intended to establish an appropriate management level or achieve a thriving natural ecological balance. The proposal is in conformance with the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (Public Law 92-195), as amended.

D. MAJOR ISSUES

This proposal addresses three major issues:

1. What is the impact of reducing the wild horse population on the vegetative resources?
2. Is the water that is available for wild horses sufficient for their needs?
3. What is the impact on the wild horse herd if 2000 animals are removed?
4. What is the impact on wild horses during removal?

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

ALTERNATIVE 1 - THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to remove excess wild horses from the Nellis Air Force Range. Implementation of the proposed action would removal no more than 2000 wild horses contingent upon available funding.

All CAPs

A. Administration of the Gather

Water trapping will be used to capture no more than 2000 wild horses beginning after April 22. If necessary a helicopter may be used to supplement operations after July 1. The entire operation is not expected to exceed approximately 12 weeks. Subsequent removals will be based on additional monitoring data and be the subject of a future removal plan.

This removal will be conducted through the Nevada East Wild Horse/Burro Removal Requirements Contract (N651-C1-3018) or through the FY91 equivalent requirements contract. The removal will be supervised by a Contracting Officer's Representative (COR) and a Project Inspector (PI). Sorting operations will be supervised by COR/PI. Aging operations will be conducted by Bureau personnel. All stipulations contained in this removal plan and the contract will apply. Through either it's own personnel or the contractor the BLM will be responsible for the capture, care, sorting, temporary holding and transportation from the removal area of all wild horses .

Two weeks prior to the start of the removal, BLM will provide a precapture evaluation of existing conditions in the removal area. The evaluation will include animal condition, prevailing temperatures, soil conditions, topography, road conditions, locations of fences and other physical barriers, water availability, and animal distribution in relation to potential trap locations.

The evaluation will also conclude whether the level of activity associated with the removal operation is likely to cause undue stress to the animals. A determination will be made as to whether such stress could be tolerated by the horses if a veterinarian is utilized or whether a delay in the capture activity is warranted. If it is determined the removal can proceed with a veterinarian present, the services of a veterinarian will be obtained before the removal proceeds.

It is estimated that no more than seven trap locations (Appendix I) will be required to accomplish the work. Potential trap sites include Willow Spring, Rose Spring Pipeline, Silver Bow Spring, Corral Spring, Tunnel Spring, Cactus Spring and Cedar Well. Potential trap sites occur on or near existing roads.

Prior to setting up traps and support facilities, cultural resource and biological assessment of these sites will be conducted by qualified BLM specialists. Trap locations exhibiting significant cultural resources or sensitive biological values will be shifted or eliminated from consideration or alternate locations selected where mitigation is possible.

B. CAPTURE

1. Time and Method

The removal will commence after April 22, 1991, when weather and wild horse conditions permit. Once the removal operation begins, it is anticipated they will last approximately twelve weeks.

Water trapping, possibly supplemented with helicopter herding after July 1, will be used to removal wild horses. If water trapping is unsuccessful, a helicopter will be used to move wild horses to trap sites, where they will be encouraged into traps.

The temporary traps and corrals will be constructed from portable pipe panels. A loading chute at the holding corral will be equipped with plywood sides or similar material so horses' legs will not get caught in the panels. Trap wings will be constructed of portable panels, jute netting, or other materials determined to be non-harmful to the horses. Barbed wire or other harmful materials will not be allowed for wing construction. All trap, corral, and wing construction will be approved by the COR/PI.

2. Number of Animals to be Removed

The number of wild horses to be removed during this removal is no more than 2000, contingent upon available funding.

3. Number of Animals Remaining

Current population estimates indicate that there will be in excess of 4000 wild horses remaining in the removal area.

C. SORTING

At each holding site, animals will be sorted into the following four categories using the criteria listed:

1. ANIMALS TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RANGE must meet the following criteria:
 - a. six years of age and under which are determined to be free from defects.
 - b. able to be shipped from processing center within six weeks of arrival.
2. Any LAME, OLD, OR SICK ANIMALS will be destroyed in accordance with 43 CFR Subpart 4730.1 using the following criteria:
 - a. Lame means an animal with one or more malfunctioning limbs that permanently impair freedom of movement.
 - b. Old means an animal characterized because of age by its physical deterioration and inability to fend for itself, suffering or closeness to death.

c. Sick means an animal with failing health, infirmity or disease from which there is little chance of recovery.

3. ANIMALS TO BE RELEASED BACK ON TO THE RANGE will be selected using the following criteria:

- a. Pregnant mares.
- b. Mares with foals.
- c. Animals exceeding six years of age.
- d. Animals without hereditary defects not meeting other criteria for destruction. An example is an animal blinded in one eye due to injury.

4. BRANDED AND CLAIMED ANIMALS will be removed from the range using the following criteria:

- a. Branded animals with offspring, including yearlings.
- b. Unbranded or claimed animals with offspring, including yearlings with obvious evidence of existing or former private ownership (e.g., geldings, bobbed tails, photo documentation, saddle marks, etc.).
- c. Unbranded animals and offspring without obvious evidence of former private ownership.

5. Process

a. Removal. Animals meeting the removal criteria will be returned to the contractor from transport to a processing center.

b. Destruction. The COR/PI will have the primary responsibility for determining when an animal will be destroyed. Due to security restrictions involving personnel permitted to carry fire arms on the Nellis Air Force Range, Advanced Security Inc. (ASI) supervisory personnel will perform the actual destruction. When the need for destruction questionable, a veterinarian will be called to assist in making a final determination.

The carcasses of wild horses that die or must be destroyed, as a result of any infectious, contagious or parasitic disease, will be disposed of by burial to a depth of at least 3 feet. The carcasses of other wild horses which must be destroyed will be disposed of by removing them from the capture site or holding corral and placing them in a inconspicuous location to minimize the visual impacts. Carcasses will not be placed in drainage regardless of drainage size or downstream destination.

c. Release. Animals selected for release back on the range will be retained until the trap site in which they were captured is relocated and their recapture is unlikely.

d. Branded and Claimed. A Notice of Intent to Impound and 28-day

Notice to Gather Wild Horses will be issued concurrently by the BLM, prior to any removal operations in this area. The Nevada Department of Agriculture and the District Brand Inspector will receive copies of these notices. The COR/PI will contact the District Brand Inspector and make arrangements for dates and times when brand inspections will be needed.

When horses are captured, the COR/PI and the District Brand Inspector will jointly inspect all animals at the holding facility in the removal area. The COR/PI, after consultation with the District Brand Inspector, will determine if unbranded animals are wild and free-roaming horses. The District Brand Inspector will identify ownership of branded animals and their offspring and, if possible, the ownership of unbranded animals determined not to be wild and free-roaming horses.

Branded horses with offspring and claimed unbranded horses with offspring for which the owners have been identified by the District Brand Inspector will be retained in the custody of the BLM in a separate holding corral. Release of these animals to the owner or claimant will be upon settlement of impoundment and or trespass charges. Appropriate charges will be determined by the Caliente Area Manager in accordance with 43 CFR Subpart 4710.6 and 43 CFR Subpart 4150. In the event settlement is not made, the horses will be sold at public auction by the BLM.

Branded horses with offspring whose owners cannot be determined, and unclaimed, unbranded horses with offspring having evidence of existing or former private ownership will be released to the Nevada Department of Agriculture (District Brand Inspector) as estray.

The District Brand Inspector will provide the COR/PI with a brand inspection certificate for the immediate shipment of wild horses to Palomino Valley Center (Reno). A similar certificate will be issued for the branded or claimed horses for whom impoundment and trespass charges have not been offered or received in order to ship them to public auction or another holding facility.

D. HOLDING

The holding facility will be located on lands withdrawn for military purposes, with all access controlled by the United States Air Force (USAF). All requests for public access to the holding facility will be made to the Caliente Area Manager, who will then forward the request to the USAF. The Air Force will evaluate the request and grant or deny access.

The contractor will provide all feed, water, labor, and equipment to care for captured horses at the holding facility. The contractor will also provide transportation of captured horses from the temporary holding facility to the Palomino Valley Center (Reno) Nevada. BLM will provide transportation of unclaimed and claimed branded horses to an approved facility for release to the claimant or for handling under Nevada State estray laws. All work will be accomplished in a safe and humane manner and be in accordance with the provisions of 43 CFR Part 4700 and the following specifications, provisions, and attached work location maps. All labor, vehicles, helicopters, traps, troughs, feed, temporary holding facilities, and other supplies and equipment including, but

not limited to the aforementioned, shall be furnished by the contractor. BLM will furnish contract supervision.

E. TRANSPORTATION

1. Wild Horses

After sorting, wild horses will be transported to PVC or possibly to the Bureau's processing center in Kingman, AZ. Transportation will be in accordance with standards in the stipulations and specifications section in this plan.

2. Branded and Claimed Horses

Branded and claimed horses will be transported off of the Range by the BLM or the Brand Inspector depending on the final disposition of the individual animals.

F. RESPONSIBILITIES

1. District Manager

The District Manager is responsible for maintaining and protecting the health and welfare of the wild horses. A COR/PI will be on site during the capture activities to ensure contractor compliance with the contract stipulations and to protect the health and welfare of the animals. In addition the COR/PI will be on site during the other handling activities to ensure compliance with applicable standards, procedures and the removal plan stipulations.

2. Area Manager

All publicity, formal public contact, and inquiries will be handled through the Caliente Resource Area Manager. The Area Manager will coordinate contacts with Palomino Valley Center (PVC) or other handling facilities, to assure space is available, horses are handled humanely and efficiently, and are arriving from the capture site in good condition.

3. Other BLM Personnel

Prior to the removal operation attached/detailed BLM personnel will tour the removal area and look at potential trap sites. In addition they will be briefed on results of the precapture evaluation, the objectives and standards of their tasks and the removal plan stipulations.

4. Contracting Officer's Representative and Project Inspector

The COR/PI will be directly responsible for conducting the removal including supervision other attached/detailed BLM personnel and the Contractor. The COR/PI is also responsible for reporting the proceedings to the Caliente Resource Area Manager, Las Vegas District Manager, the State Director's representative and the Contracting Officer.

The COR/PI, through on-site observation, will evaluate the contractor's ability to perform the required work in accordance with the contract stipulations.

Compliance with the contract stipulations will be facilitated through issuance of written instruction to the contractor, stop work orders, and default procedures should the contractor not perform work according to stipulations.

5. Contractor

The contractor will be briefed on his duties and responsibilities before the Notice to Proceed is issued. An inspection of the contractor's equipment at this time will be conducted to insure all items meet required specifications. Any equipment that does not meet specifications must be replaced within 36 hours. The contractor will be informed of the terrain involved, animal condition, road conditions, potential trap locations, water availability and the presence of fences and other dangerous barriers.

ALTERNATIVE 1 - PROPOSED ACTION STIPULATIONS AND SPECIFICATIONS

A. MOTORIZED EQUIPMENT

1. All motorized equipment employed in the transportation of captured animals shall be in compliance with appropriate State and Federal laws and regulations applicable to the humane transportation of animals.

2. Vehicles will be in good repair, of adequate rated capacity, and operated so as to insure that captured animals are transported without undue risk or injury.

3. Only stock trailers will be allowed for transporting animals from traps to temporary holding facilities. Only Bobtail trucks, stock trailers, or single deck trucks will be used to haul animals from temporary holding facilities to final destination. Sides or stockracks of transporting vehicles will be a minimum height of 6 feet 6 inches from vehicle floor. Single deck trucks with trailers 40 feet or longer will have two partition gates to separate animals. Trailers less than 40 feet will have at least one partition gate to separate the animals. Each partition shall be a minimum of 6 feet high and shall have a minimum 5 foot wide swinging gate. The use of double deck trailers is unacceptable and will not be allowed.

4. All vehicles used to transport animals to final destination will be equipped with at least one door at the rear end of the vehicle which is capable of sliding either horizontally or vertically.

5. Floors of vehicles and the loading chute will be covered and maintained with a non-skid surface such as sand, mineral soil or wood shavings, to prevent the animals from slipping. This will be confirmed by the COR/PI prior to each loading.

6. Animals to be loaded and transported in any vehicle will be as directed by the COR/PI and may include limitations on numbers according to age, size, sex, temperament, and animal condition. A minimum of 1.4 linear foot per adult animal and .75 linear foot per foal will be allowed per standard 8 foot wide stock trailer/truck.

The COR/PI will supervise the loading of the wild horses to be transported from the trap to the temporary holding corral. The COR/PI will require separation of small foals and/or weak horses from the rest should there be a potential for injury during the trip. The COR/PI will consider the distance and condition of the road and animals in making this determination. Horses shipped from the temporary holding corral to the PVC will normally be separated by studs, mares and foals (including small yearlings). However, if the numbers of these classes of animals are too few in one compartment and too many in another, animals may be shifted between compartments to properly distribute the animals in the trailer. This may include placing a younger, lighter stud with the mares or a weak mare with the foals. Further separation may be required should condition of the animals warrant.

The COR/PI supervising the loading will exercise authority to off-load animals should there be too many horses on the trailer/truck.

7. The COR/PI will consider the condition of the animals, weather conditions, type of vehicles, distance to be transported, or other factors when planning for the movement of captured animals. The COR/PI will provide for any brand and/or inspection services required for the captured animals.

It is currently planned to ship all horses to the Palomino Valley Center. Palomino Valley Center personnel involved in off-loading the horses will provide feedback to the COR/PI on the condition of shipped horses. Should problems arise, shipping methods, and/or separation of the horses will be changed in an attempt to alleviate the problems.

8. If the COR/PI determines that dust conditions are such that the animals could be endangered during transportation, the round-up crew will be instructed to adjust speed. The maximum distance over which animals may have to be transported on dirt roads is approximately 30 miles per load. Periodic checks by BLM employees will be made as the horses are transported along dirt roads. If speed restrictions are placed in effect, then BLM employees will, at times, follow and/or time trips to ensure compliance.

B. TRAPPING AND CARE

1. All capture attempts will be accomplished by water trapping and/or the utilization of a helicopter. A minimum of one saddle horse will be immediately available at the trap site to accomplish roping if necessary. Roping will be done as determined by the COR/PI and under no circumstances will animals be tied down for more than 1 hour. Roping will be allowed only to capture an orphaned foal or a suspected wet mare.

2. The helicopter will be used in such a manner to insure that bands or herds will remain together and that foals are not be left behind. The Las Vegas District may use an observation helicopter as a means in which to supervise the use of the project helicopter. In the absence of an observation helicopter, the project helicopter or saddle horses may be used to place a BLM observer on a point overlooking the area of the helicopter herding operations.

3. The rate of movement and distance the animals travel will not exceed

limitations set by the COR/PI who will consider terrain, physical barriers, weather, condition of the animals, and other factors.

BLM will not allow horses to be herded more than 10 miles nor faster than 20 miles per hour. The COR/PI may decrease the rate of travel or distance moved should the route to the trap site pose a danger or cause avoidable stress (steep and/or rocky). Animal condition will also be considered in making distance and speed restrictions.

Temperature limitations on helicopter operations are 10 degrees F. as a minimum and 95 degrees F. as a maximum. Special attention will be given to avoiding physical hazards such as fences.

4. It is estimated that a maximum of seven trap locations will be required to accomplish the work.

5. All traps, wings, and holding facilities will be constructed, maintained and operated to handle the animals in a safe and humane manner and be in accordance with the following:

a. Traps and holding facilities will be constructed of portable panels, the top of which shall not be less than 72 inches high, and the bottom rail of which will not be more than 12 inches from ground level. All traps and holding facilities will be oval or round in design.

b. All loading chute sides will be fully covered with plywood or like material. The loading chute will also be a minimum of 6 feet high.

c. All runways will be a minimum of 20 feet long and a minimum of 6 feet high and will be covered with plywood or like material a minimum of 1 foot to 5 feet above ground level.

d. Wings will not be constructed out of barbed wire or other materials injurious to animals and must be approved by the COR/PI.

e. All crowding pens including the gates leading to the runways will be covered with a material which prevents the animals from seeing out (plywood, burlap, etc.) and will be covered a minimum of 1 foot to 5 feet above ground level. Eight linear feet of this material will be capable of being removed or let down to provide a viewing window.

f. All pens and runways used for the movement and handling of animals will be connected with hinged self-locking gates.

6. No fence modification will be made without authorization from the COR/PI. The round-up crew will be responsible for restoration of any fence modification which needs to be made.

If the route by which the contractor wishes to herd horses passes through a fence, the contractor will be required to roll up the fencing material and pull up the posts to provide at least one-eighth mile of gap. The standing fence on each side of the gap will be well-flagged for a distance of 300 yards from the

gap on each side.

7. When dust conditions occur within or adjacent to the trap or holding facility, the contractor will be required to wet down the ground with water.

8. Alternate pens, within the holding facility will be furnished by the contractor to separate mares with small foals, sick and injured animals, and stray animals from the other horses. Animals will be sorted as to age, number, size, temperament, sex, and condition when in the holding facility so as to minimize, to the extent possible, injury due to fighting and trampling.

9. Shipment of animals will be scheduled to arrive at final destination between 6:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Every effort will be made to ensure that the time horses are standing on the trucks prior to off loading is minimized. No shipments will be scheduled to arrive at final destination on Sunday.

10. Animals held in the traps and/or holding facilities will be provided with a continuous supply of fresh clean water at a minimum rate of 10 gallons per animal per day. Animals held for 10 hours or more in the traps or holding facilities will be provided good quality hay at the rate of not less than 2 pounds of hay per 100 pounds of estimated body weight per day. A minimum of 400 square feet of space will be provided for each animal (mare and foal=two animals) to be held in excess of ten hours.

11. Security to prevent loss, injury or death of captured animals at the capture site will be the responsibility of the contractor until delivery to final destination.

Security at the holding facility will be the responsibility of the BLM.

12. The contractor will restrain sick or injured animals if treatment is necessary. The COR/PI will determine if injured animals must be destroyed and provide for destruction of such animals. The contractor may be required to dispose of the carcasses as directed by the COR/PI.

13. The contractor will leave water traps open at the completion of each day's capture operation to allow wildlife access to water.

C. HELICOPTER, PILOT, AND COMMUNICATIONS

1. The contractor must operate in compliance with Federal Aviation Regulations, Part 91. Pilots provided by the contractor will comply with the Contractor's Federal Aviation Certificates, applicable regulations of the State of Nevada, and will follow what are recognized as safe flying practices.

2. When refueling, the helicopter will remain a distance of at least a 1,000 feet or more from animals, vehicles (other than fuel truck), and personnel not involved in refueling.

3. The COR/PI will have the means to communicate with the Contractor's pilot and be able to direct the use of the removal helicopter at all times. If communications cannot be established, the BLM will take steps as necessary to

protect the welfare of the animals. The frequency(s) used for this contract will be assigned.

4. The contractor will obtain the necessary FCC licenses for the radio system.

5. The proper operation, service, and maintenance of all contractor furnished helicopters is the responsibility of the contractor. The BLM reserves the right to remove from service pilots and helicopters which, in the opinion of the contracting officer or COR/PI, violate contract rules, are unsafe, or otherwise unsatisfactory. In this event, the contractor will be notified in writing to furnish replacement pilots or helicopters within 48 hours of notification. All such replacements must be approved in advance of operation by the contracting officer or his representatives.

D. CONTRACTOR-FURNISHED PROPERTY

1. All hay, water, vehicles, saddle horses, helicopters and other equipment will be provided by the contractor. Other equipment includes, but is not limited to, a minimum of 1,500 linear feet of 72-inch high (minimum height) panels for traps and holding facilities. Separate water troughs will be provided at each pen where animals are being held.

2. The contractor will furnish an avionics system that will allow communications between the contractor's helicopter and his fuel truck.

3. The contractor will furnish a VHF/AM radio transceiver in the contractor's helicopter which has the capability to operate on a frequency of 122.925 MHz.

4. The contractor will provide a programmable VHF/FM radio transceiver in the contractor's helicopter to accommodate the COR/PI in monitoring the removal operation.

ALTERNATIVE 1 - PROPOSED ACTION FOLLOWUP MONITORING

During and upon completion of removal, ^{the BLM will continue to} ~~monitoring of~~ the wild horse herd, the water sources, ^{and} the vegetation ~~by BLM will continue~~ to determine the degree to which objectives are being met. Future actions will be based on the results of this monitoring information.

ALTERNATIVE 2 - NO ACTION

Under the No Action alternative, no removal operations would be conducted and no wild horses would be removed.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT ANALYZED

A. TRAPPING WILD HORSES BY RUNNING THEM ON HORSEBACK

Trapping 2000 wild horses by running them on horseback is not feasible as wild horses are easily lost after starting them towards the trap. Injuries to both people and wild horses are more common when this method is employed. The cost factor, as demonstrated by previous removals, would also be prohibitive. This alternative will, therefore, not be considered further.

B. SUPPLEMENTAL FEED AND WATER

Hauling feed and water is possible but not considered economical and is beyond the intent of the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act. Supplementing feed and water would not maintain the horses in a thriving natural ecologic balance with their environment. Horse populations could climb to artificially high numbers, resulting in further habitat degradation. This alternative was eliminated from further analysis for these reasons.

Developing Water Sources

All known spring sources on the Nevada Wild Horse Range have been developed or are planned for development. Insufficient hydrological data are available at this time to ascertain if spring development and/or well drilling is feasible for other areas within the Nellis Air Force Range. It is also unknown how such development/drilling would affect the primary (military) use of the area. If determined feasible, water development projects could require a minimum of 3 years before implementation. Therefore, this was not considered as a viable alternative at this time because it would not resolve the resource issue in a timely manner.

C. RANGE SEEDING

The Conservation Plantings for Rangeland, Windbreaks, Wildlife, Soil, Conservation Cover (SCS, 1978) recommends no species for planting in areas that receive less than 8 inches of precipitation. Average precipitation on the Nellis Air Force Range is 6 inches per year, making the probability of a successful seeding slight. Failed range seedings give undesirable plants (noxious weed and poisonous plants) an opportunity to establish. Once established, it is very difficult and costly to remove them. Because of the time required to establish seedings, the cost and the low probability of success, this is not considered to be a viable alternative chance

III. DESCRIPTION OF AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. LOCATION AND STATUS

The Nellis Air Force Range is located in Clark, Lincoln and Nye counties of southern Nevada. The proposed removal area is centered in the northwestern portion of the Nellis Air Force Range. Appendix I identifies the proposed removal area.

Topographically, the removal area ranges from flat valley bottoms to steep, mountainous terrain. Wild horses are anticipated to be found at all elevations during the removal period, although past utilization and distribution patterns indicate that they may be found congregated in the valley bottoms. There are few physical barriers and fences in the area and these areas will be avoided.

A more detailed description of the affected environment can be found in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Withdrawal of the Nellis Air Force Bombing Range, Nye, Clark, and Lincoln Counties, Nevada (U.S. DOI, BLM and USAF, 1981) and the Nellis Air Force Range Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (U.S. DOI, BLM, 1989). These documents are on file at the BLM Las Vegas District Office and Caliente Resource Area office. Certain elements of the affected environment, necessary for the understanding of the anticipated impacts, will be described in the Environmental Consequences analysis of this document.

No livestock grazing is authorized within the withdrawn lands. Pronghorn antelope and mule deer are the major big game species located within the proposed removal area.

B. WILD HORSE POPULATIONS

Large numbers of wild horses roam freely throughout the Nellis Air Force Range, often in close proximity to military and related activities. In 1988, 61 horses died of ammonia toxicity when they accidentally ingested urea laden water. During 1989, eight horses are estimated to have been fatally injured in horse/vehicle accidents.

* The July 1989 census counted 6,255 wild horses on the Nellis Air Force Range; the August 1990 census located 4,302 horses. A total of 683 wild horses were removed under an emergency removal in 1989 and known death loss of 48 occurred between the census activities in 1989 and 1990.

1. Relative wild horse concentrations

Data collected on February 9 and 10, 1991 by BLM and Nellis personnel.

<u>Nellis AFB Range Chart Designations</u>	<u>Relative Population Percentage of Sample</u>	<u>Population Sampled</u>
71N	14.6	473
71S	7.2	232
76	7	225
75E	0.2	8
R-4809A	17.1	554
EC WEST	33.3	1078
EC EAST	5.6	181
74B	15	485
75W	0	0
TPECR	0	0
EC SOUTH	0	0
PAHUTE	0	0
74A	0	0
76A	0	0
TOTALS	100	3236

(not to be considered as a total population census)

2. Overall horse condition

All the horses sampled in 71N, 71S, 76, 75E, EC WEST, EC EAST, R-4809A, and 74B were judged to be in good body condition and vigorous. All but one or two were not showing ribs, ran with energy.

This is explained by the August/September late season rains stimulating warm season annual and perennial plant growth. This forage apparently carried the horses through the fall/winter and allowed them to regain body reserves and put on weight. (See vegetative summary)

★ A low young horse percentage was observed in areas with heavy to severe utilization and degraded range. This may reflect a poor herd health.

C. WATER

An analysis of monitoring and rangeland data indicates that sufficient perennial water exists to support between 1100 and 1200 wild horses on the Nellis Air Force Range, while maintaining a thriving ecological balance between horses and their environment (see Range Evaluation Summaries-Appendix II).

1. Water availability and general quality status

Under average climatic conditions, water sources would be expected to have high flows at this time of year. Ephemeral water sources are found around the alkali flats where water naturally collects in the spring. These are considered to be

unreliable sources because of their short term and unpredictable availability.

The following observations were made on between February 9 and March 3, 1991.

Antelope and Willow springs had two 12 to 20 inch mud holes. Antelope springs had less water on 3/3 than on 2/10. The nearest known water is 7 to 10 miles away.

There was a standing mud hole near the fueling area in EC WEST. Soil moisture depth was measured to be 9 inches. This was from the March 1 and 2 rain/snow storm.

It should be noted that even though some of the water sources (ephemeral and perennial) may be considered satisfactory as of February 9 and 10, 1991, the existing wild horse population will probably far outstrip the supply as the temperature increases.

Nellis AFB Range Chart
Designations

Relative Water Status
POOR SATISFACTORY

71N	100%	0
71S	No Known Water. They use 71N and 76 waters.	
76	0	100%
75E	No Known Water Available	
R-4809A	0	100%
EC WEST	75%	25%
EC EAST	50%	50%
74B	67%	33%
SUMMARY	<u>62%</u>	<u>38%</u>

2. Other water observations

SPRING SOURCE	RATE OF FLOW (gal/min - gal/day) BY YEAR			
	1989	1990	1/15/91	2/21/91
Cliff	2.8/4032	2.0/2880		0/0
Cedar	.25/360	.19/274	.18/259	.18/259
Rose	2.5/3600	2.0/2880		1.9/2736
Silvr Bow	1.0/1440	1.0/1440	.5/720	.5/720
Silvr corral		1.0/1440	frozen	0/0
Tunnel	.125/180	.09/130		.05/72
Corral	.125/180	.47/678	.63/907	.63/907
Harleys	.125/180	1.0/1440		.125/180
Cedar Pass		125/180	frozen	.06/461
Cactus		1.5/2160	1.7/2448	1.7/2448
Antelope		.75/1080	Moist on 3/3/91	
Totals		1990=10.1 gal/min or 14,582 gal/day		1991= 5.1 gal/min or 7,783 gal/day

SPRING SOURCE	RATE OF FLOW (gal/min - gal/day) BY YEAR	
	March 13	
Cliff Spring	0/0	not read use 2/21 reading
Cedar Well	.02/34	
Rose Spring	1.9/2736	not read use 2/21 reading
Silver Bow source	0/0	
Silver Bow corral	0/0	
Tunnel Spring	.05/72	not read use 2/21 reading
Corral Spring	.63/907	not read use 2/21 reading
Harleys Spring	.125/180	not read use 2/21 reading
Cedar Pass Spr.	.06/461	not read use 2/21 reading
Cactus Spg I & II	1.5/2160	I = .75/1080 II = .75/1080
Antelope Spring	.03/45	
Totals	4.3 gal/min	or 6,595 gal/day

* Water at these spring sources in 1991 is only 45 % of what it was in 1990 or a 55 % natural reduction in available water at these springs due to drought.

3. Additional springs read 3/13/91

① Sumner Spring	1.5 - 2160	Water rights owned by Fallini. He built trough and reservoir for wild horses use on his own.
② Cedar Spring	Good water	not read Fallini has supplied a pit reservoir for wild horse use on his own.
Total for 3/13/91	5.8 gal/day	- 8755 gal/day

4. Water table observations

Water table levels were measured at Cedar Wells and they have dropped six (6) feet. The water table for Silverbow Spring has dropped below the collection box for the spring and the creek (Breen) has no water flow and no water. The NWAHA members were there in the 60's, 70's, and 80's and stated that the creek and spring had running water. Photos BLM and the NWAHA have show a healthy running creek in the 60's and 70's. This is a clear indication that the dry conditions and low ground water recharge potential under dry conditions have resulted in a dropped water table.

D. VEGETATION

In 1989, heavy utilization on key forage plants was recorded at distances 15 miles away from perennial water sources. Utilization was recorded at 65 percent (heavy) on Indian rice grass (Oryzopsis hymenoides) and 70 percent (heavy) on winter fat (Ceratoides lanata). Both levels are well above the allowable use level of 50 percent recommended for areas that receive yearlong grazing.

1. Vegetation Status and Conditions

A use pattern map was developed using data collected on February 9 and 10 for 71N, 71S, and 75E. A cursory utilization map was developed to estimate the use levels in EC WEST on February 9 and 10.

Another field work was completed on March 3 & 13, to corroborate earlier observations. In all the areas sampled and flown little to no residual grass was available. Spring rains are expected to produce measurable perennial or annual herbaceous plant growth. This growth will provide temporary forage, however, the effects will be short term in nature. Range condition objectives can not be met under existing population levels.

USE LEVELS IN THE SEVERE
(81 TO 100 % OF CURRENT YEARS GROWTH) 1/

Nellis AFB Range Chart Designations	Vegetative use status estimated		
	in Square Miles	in Acres	
71N	46.7	29,879	SEVERE
71S	48.3	30,968	SEVERE
76	3.9	2,480	SEVERE
75W	7	4,539	SEVERE
75E	14	8,957	SEVERE
R-4809A	115.5	73,898	SEVERE
EC WEST	296.5	189,816	SEVERE
EAST	41.3	26,454	SEVERE
74B	118.4	75,764	SEVERE
Estimated Totals	691.6 Sq miles	442,755 acres	SEVERE USE

E. AIR QUALITY/VISIBILITY

Dust has reduced visibility within the range during the last decade, decreasing the effectiveness of certain optical testing conducted in the area. The increase in dust is attributable to the trailing of increased wild horse populations and to the reduced vegetative cover.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. MANDATORY ELEMENTS

There would be no impacts from the Proposed Action or Alternative 1-No Action to threatened or endangered species (plants and animals); floodplains; wetlands; areas of critical environmental concern; wild and scenic rivers; visual resource management; prime or unique farmlands; wilderness; water quality; or cultural, paleontological and historical resource values.

The following programs would not be impacted by the Alternative 1-Proposed Action or Alternative 2-No Action: minerals, land uses, recreation, range (livestock), and forestry.

ALTERNATIVE 1-PROPOSED ACTION

A. WILD HORSE POPULATION

The removal of 2000 wild horses will reduce grazing pressure on the range by approximately 24,000 AUMs. Reduced competition between wild horses and wildlife for forage, water, cover, and living space would improve the physical condition and survival rates of the wild horses. Managing the wild horses at a level based on the available supply of forage and perennial water would help maintain the natural ecological balance of the area.

Sufficient numbers of wild horses will remain within the removal area to maintain viable herds and to provide for interaction between bands.

In summary, the removal of 2000 wild horses will improve the habitat for the remaining wild horses and leave a viable population.

B. WILD HORSES REMOVED FROM THE RANGE

Water trapping has proven to be the least stressful removal method. The possibility exists that wild horses could sustain injury during removal operations due to panic behavior. The use of helicopters to capture excess wild horses might result in leppy (abandoned) foals and split bands, as well as injured horses. Removal operations might also disrupt band structure either temporarily or permanently.

Based upon prior capture experience using helicopter herding, death loss would not exceed 2 percent of the horses captured at the trap site.

The standards applied in the proposed actions will insure humane treatment and safe handling of the wild horses during capture, care, temporary holding, and transportation to the BLM adoption preparation facility. Regardless of the capture method used, wild horses would experience some stress due to capture operations.

C. VEGETATION

Monitoring data of ecological condition is in a downward trend and further indicates the vegetation in the area can not support the current wild horse population. Current estimates place the population at approximately in excess of 4000 adult wild horses within the proposed removal area. This plan will result in the removal of no more than 2000 wild horses. This will leave in excess of 2000 wild horses.

The removal of 2000 wild horses will reduce utilization by 24,000 AUMs. This reduction will decrease the acreage which is currently measured in the severe use category. The downward trend in ecological condition of the different plant communities should be stopped. The ecological condition may improve after the removal operations, with reduced utilization on the more desirable grasses and shrubs (refer to Appendix II, Rangeland Evaluation Summaries for more complete data). Over time, production of these species may increase, as might their percentage of composition within the community. However, ecological condition objectives still may not be met with the remaining wild horse population.

Vegetation at the trap sites and holding corrals would sustain a negative impact from trampling by wild horses concentrated at those locations. This would be a minor impact, totaling approximately 1-2 acres at each site, in relation to the large acreage removal area. Vegetative regeneration would be expected to occur.

In summary, removal of 2000 wild horses will cause an improvement vegetative condition and provide additional forage for remaining animals. Although deterioration of the range should be eliminated, a thriving ecological balance may still not be met.

D. WATER AVAILABILITY

Based on the data presented in the description of the affected environment, approximately 7000 gallons of water per day are currently available to the existing population of over 4000 wild horses. A 2000 head reduction of this population will nearly double available water to approximately 4 gallons per head from the sources identified. This amount still falls short of the desired 10 gallon per head per day.

E. AIR QUALITY/VISIBILITY

Based on the analysis of vegetation and the reduction in the number of horses remaining on the range, dust in the air may be reduced. This is dependent upon whether an increase in plant density does, in fact, occur. In addition, the reduction in the number of animals remaining on the range should reduce trampling and trailing to some degree. This should reduce the impacts to visibility currently effecting military uses of the range.

ALTERNATIVE 2-NO ACTION

A. WILD HORSE POPULATION

The trend in vegetative condition would continue to decline and the degradation of wild horse habitat would continue. The acreage in the severe use category would increase. Competition for available water would increase. Because of this decline Wild horse condition would deteriorate and death losses would increase until the population came into balance with available water and forage.

B. WILD HORSES REMOVED FROM THE RANGE

No wild horses would be removed from the range under this alternative; no impacts would occur from removal or adoption processes.

C. VEGETATION

Heavy utilization would continue on the desirable grasses and shrubs. These plants would eventually disappear from the community and be replaced by undesirable plants (noxious weeds, poisonous plants). Such succession would reduce the amount of available forage for wild horses and some wildlife species.

D. AIR QUALITY

As stated above, reduced plant density would occur and wild horse populations would increase in the short term. There would be an increase in the dust levels from the present. As a result, certain defense-related optical testing opportunities will be diminished within portions of the Nellis Range.

V. IRREVERSIBLE AND IRRETRIEVABLE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES

Under Alternative 1-Proposed Action, water and forage resources would be improved and a viable wild horse population will remain on the range.

No irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources is anticipated to occur under the Alternative 1-Proposed Action.

VI. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Public notification was given prior to the preparation of the Environmental Assessment and the Removal Plan. Public comments were solicited (see Record of Persons, Groups, and Agencies Contacted) and were considered for the final documents.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

INSERT LIST OF COMMENTORS AND SUMMARY OF COMMENTS RECEIVED DURING 30 DAY COMMENT PERIOD...Feb 19, to April 15,1991

xxXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

B. BUREAU REVIEW

BLM Specialists involved in the draft review were as follows:

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dawna Ferris | Archeologist/EnvironmentalCoordinator,CalienteResource Area. |
| Jule Durfee | Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, Caliente Resource Area |
| Larry Lacey | Surface Protection Specialist, Caliente Resource Area |
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