



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Las Vegas Field Office
4701 N. Torrey Pines Drive
Las Vegas, Nevada 89130-2301

To: Field Manager, Las Vegas Field Office

From: Red Rock HMA Range Assessment Team (Ron Hall, Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, National Program Office; Valerie Metscher, Rangeland Management Specialist, Tonopah Field Station; Paul Podborny, Lead Natural Resource Specialist, Ely Field Office; Duane Wilson, Rangeland Management Specialist, Nevada State Office)

Subject: Condition of the Rangeland and Wild Horses within the Red Rock HMA

This team of Bureau specialists was asked to evaluate the current condition of the rangeland and the wild horses within the Red Rock HMA. We were asked to determine the number of wild horses the HMA could support without supplemental waters, with the existing supplemental waters, and with the development of new waters. We were also asked to look at the condition class of the existing wild horses in the HMA. We reviewed existing monitoring data collected in the HMA, and toured the areas currently being used by the wild horses.

Extensive efforts to preserve the wild horses in the Red Rock HMA have been made by the National Wild Horse Association, BLM, and others. All involved are to be commended for their concern, dedication, and resolve on behalf of these animals.

This team did not consider the social-political issues involved with managing wild horses in close proximity to Las Vegas. We were only concerned with rangeland health and the wellbeing of the wild horses in the long-term. In accordance with the wild horse regulations, we considered whether wild horses could be "managed as self-sustaining populations of healthy animals in balance with other uses and the productive capacity of their habitat." Listed below are our findings and recommendations.

VEGETATION RESOURCE

Findings

1. The area around the proposed Wild Horse Valley Well Pipeline is a Limy 5" - 7" range site dominated by creosotebush and white bursage with less than 10 percent perennial grasses at potential natural community (PNC). Normal year production for all vegetation would be about 300 pounds per acre. During our field tour, we observed less than one percent perennial grasses in the plant community, primarily big galletta. Estimated stocking rate (at 50 percent

utilization based on the allowable use level (AUL) in the RMP) for a normal year would be approximately 520 acres per AUM; for a dry year it would be 780 acres per AUM.

2. The Bird Springs area including the galleta flat east of the spring is a Shallow Gravelly Loam 5" - 7" range site dominated by blackbrush. We estimated there is less than five percent big galleta in the plant community. Normal year production for all vegetation would be about 350 pounds per acre. There appeared to be no forage available this year due to heavy and severe use in the past few years with only 8 - 10 wild horses and the current drought conditions. No green-up was observed. There is no forage value left in the dry grass plants. Drought and heavy/severe use has resulted in numerous dead or dying grass plants.
3. The large galleta flat near the proposed Wild Horse Valley Well is a Gravelly Fan 5" - 7" range site with up to fifty percent perennial grasses at PNC. Normal year production for all vegetation would be about 600 pounds per acre. We observed moderate use of the galleta which is the AUL in the RMP. This area only covers about 300 acres which would mean there would only be about 38 AUMs of forage available in a dry year (at 50 percent use). However, proper range management would suggest an AUL of only 30 percent.
4. The area around Tunnel Spring is a blackbrush range site with little perennial grass similar to the area around Bird Spring. There was no forage observed in the immediate area around the spring. The main forage area is the galleta flat near the proposed Wild Horse Valley Well.
5. The southern portion of the HMA near Rainbow Quarry is a Shallow Gravelly Loam 8" - 10" range site almost completely dominated by blackbrush and yucca. Normal year production for all vegetation would be about 500 pounds per acre with 15 percent perennial grasses at PNC. There is a burned area that has more perennial grass, mostly Indian ricegrass and some big galleta, than unburned sites. There was a small amount of winterfat observed with light to moderate use. Use on Indian ricegrass was severe. We found many plants with dead crowns and only some live growth around the edges. There was some recent green-up. (This was the only area where we saw any green-up except on annual grasses.) There were 12 wild horses observed in the area. The only available water is being hauled by the mine company.
6. Most of the area north and south of Highway 160, including the Cottonwood Valley Burn, is a Shallow Gravelly Loam 8" - 10" range site. Normal year production for all vegetation would be about 500 pounds per acre with 15 percent perennial grass in PNC. The only perennial grass observed (Indian ricegrass) was inside the study enclosure. This area burned in the seventies, and the enclosures shows limited recovery even with thirteen years of rest. No forage is available outside the enclosure. Potential for recovery of this site is

there based on the exclosure, but the area would require years of rest from grazing.

7. The area immediately around the Mud Spring Exclosure No. 1 north of Highway 160 is a Coarse Gravelly Loam 5" - 7" range site with 45 percent perennial grass in PNC. We observed only a trace of perennial grasses outside the exclosure which appeared to be dying because of the drought. More grass was observed inside the exclosure where there is no grazing, but it too was dying because of the drought. There is no forage presently available for wild horses.

Summary

Majority of the range sites in the HMA have low potential for perennial grasses. Most of the sites currently have little to no perennial grasses present. Currently little to no forage is available because of past and current heavy to severe use and present drought conditions.

Potential to recover/restore these range sites is limited because of the low precipitation. It is even more limited with continued overgrazing by wild horses. Even with no grazing, these sites would not recover much because there is only a trace of perennial grasses in the plant communities at the present time. Sites with any potential for recovery are very small in size and are also degraded.

There appears to be no reason to develop water (Wild Horse Valley Well and Goodsprings Well) because there is essentially no forage available for wild horses in these areas.

WATER RESOUCE

Findings

1. Water is currently being hauled to several locations (i.e., Tunnel Spring, Rainbow Quarry and Bird Spring) to supplement marginal water sources.
2. The tanks at Bird Springs were nearly full and the estimated use by wild horses is only 4- 5 animals. Historically this spring produces .1 gallon per minute. The present number of wild horses is taking all the water being produced and not diminishing storage capacity.
3. Tunnel Spring is non-functional and water is being hauled to the site periodically. Present use level is estimated at less than 3 -5 animals.
4. The Rainbow Quarry site is not a traditional watering area, but is presently the concentration area for the majority of the wild horses in the HMA. Water is being hauled by the "good will" of the mine company. The pond was nearly dry on

12/2/03 and completely dry on 12/3/03. Reportedly the truck had mechanical problems. On 12/3/03 the tanker was parked at the edge of the mine and water was running from a drain valve onto the ground. No catchment/trough was provided; however, tracks indicate wild horses are watering at a shallow depression in the ground where water puddles.

Summary – The present population of ~ 25 wild horses would not survive at this time without supplemental water.

ANIMAL CONDITION

Findings

1. Three wild horses were observed in the vicinity of Bird Spring. One was in Henneke Condition Class 4, and the other two were not classified.
2. Fifteen animals were observed in the vicinity of Rainbow Quarry in Henneke Condition Class 4-5 with one in Condition class 3 and one in condition class 6.

Summary – All wild horses observed were in good condition probably because of the low number of animals, supplemental feeding that is occurring (although we do not know how extensive this is), and moving into areas not traditionally used.

HUMAN CONFLICT

Findings

1. Recreational use (bicycle riding and horseback riding) within the HMA in the vicinity of Highway 160 is heavy and has resulted in increased conflicts between humans and wild horses especially with regard to use of underpasses and trails.
2. The existing population is located as far from recreation use as resources will allow. All horses north of Highway 160 were removed in 2002.
3. Wild horses are very approachable because of the constant contact with humans.
4. The underpasses on Highway 160 are available for wild horses to use; however, if animals are not familiar with underpasses they may not be used in the future.
5. Wild burros have adapted very well to human activities in the HMA and all animals observed were in good condition.

Summary – Conflicts between wild horses and humans have occurred mainly at the underpasses and on trails used by mountain bikers and horseback riders. These conflicts will only increase especially as Las Vegas expands to the edge of the HMA.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is our recommendation that the 22 wild horses currently being held at Oliver Ranch not be released back into the HMA. Forage and water are not adequate to maintain the existing population of wild horses in the HMA let alone these additional animals. In addition, these horses have been held for over a year. Releasing them back into the HMA would be inhumane.
2. It is our recommendation that wild horses should not be managed within the Red Rock HMA. Whether existing water sources are supplemented or not, or new waters developed, there is not sufficient forage available to maintain any wild horses in the HMA on a yearlong basis. The vegetative resource has already been severely impacted, and continued grazing by wild horses would not maintain rangeland health and a thriving natural ecological balance within the area. We do feel the HMA can be managed for burros.
3. It is our recommendation that the wild horses presently in the HMA be removed. These horses are only being maintained because of water hauling. If this stops these horses will deteriorate quickly. In addition, forage is in poor condition and limited, and there may not be enough to carry these animals into the next growing season. If the drought continues into next year, there will definitely not be enough forage for these ~25 animals to prevent these animals from losing body condition.

Aron Hall

Valerie Mutscher

Paul Talley

Don E. Ecker