

Nellis
EDIT

Letter
Newletter

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WILD HORSES OF NELLIS AIR FORCE RANGE

Nevada's only designated wild horse range is within the Nellis Air Force Range. Established in 1962, Nevada Wild Horse Range comprises of 394,000 acres of the 2,209,326 acres of the Air Range. While the majority of wild horses and burros occupy lands outside of the Nevada Wild Horse Range, the Bureau of Land Management plans and agreements only allow for managing horses within the Horse Range. Practically speaking, 18 percent of the Air Force lands have been designated for wild horses and of that portion not all lands are suitable for wild horses.

In 1990-91, BLM evaluated the entire Air Range for wild horse suitability using water, distribution and forage utilization criteria. Based upon this evaluation and an agreement with the Air Force, the herd or appropriate management level was determined to be 1000 horses for the Horse Range. The difficult task was to gather horses and burros from a perceived population of 7,485 horses observed in 1991.

Beginning in 1985 through 1994, the BLM has gathered 10,431 animals from the Air Range in ^{an} attempt to get the herds within the Horse Range and to levels to sustain a long term balance with available forage and water. Remarkably, capture and census data collected on the herds show the above average longevity, productivity and recruitment. These gathers have not effectively kept up with the population growth, thus cyclic drought conditions in 1989 and now in 1996 have had severe impacts to the horse and their occupied habitats.

In February of 1996, BLM made another attempt to gather horses and implement a massive fertility control on mares. With the objective of getting horses to only 1000 head confined to the Horse Range, BLM face many defeating restrains. The adoption policy of the national "Strategic Plan" limited the gather to eight year and younger animals. Operational priorities of the Air Force limited access in areas in need of complete gathers. While the objectives were not met, by June of 1996 drought conditions eliminated available water and forage became depleted to a point that hundreds of wild horses lay in jeopardy of survival.

The Emergency Gather in July and August serves as a rescue mission and opportunity to progress to a management level that may lessen the impacts of reoccurring droughts. If successful BLM will capture 1,500 animals, remove 600, release unadoptable horses and achieve about 1,300 animals on the Air Range. Horses capture from horse free areas will be released in the Horse Range. Presently, wild horses are in extremely poor condition, especially lactating mares. Production in 1996 has been observed at 60 foals per 100 mares. This type of production under poor range conditions is high. Antelope production is never observe near this proportion even during good range years. (To protect the range and lessen the suffering of wild horses at Nellis, extreme measures are necessary.)

Nellis Air Force Range is responsive to the needs of wild horses. Due to the dynamics of the Air Force, working relationships with state and federal agencies have been problems in the past. The new good neighbor policies of Defense are proving themselves at Nellis. The new commanding officer at the Air Range is knowledgeable of the situation and making necessary accommodations to accomplish the objectives headed by BLM. Bound by a Memorandum of Understanding with the BLM and the Nellis Air Force Range Resource Management Plan, the responsible agencies are committed to properly managing wild horses within their range.

Data collection in 1996 is essential to proper management of wild horses on Nellis. Major gathers require age, sex, recruitment and color data be collected by BLM. Range monitoring data will better define the suitability and appropriate management level for the Nevada Wild Horse Range. Cyclic droughts cause population crashes and long term range damage. These data collected this year should redefine parameters for determining proper management levels of wild horses. Longevity and survival data should clearly determine the proper age structure of the future herd.

Potential management opportunities are outstanding. Never in the history of the wild horse program has more science been applied and data collected to properly manage any herd. With a third of a million acres devoted solely to wild horses, numbers can be achieved with a known composition of animals. Getting to appropriate management levels and knowing survival and recruitment rates will allow predictive long term management actions and costs.

The loss of this opportunity, and to fall back into reactive or crisis management of the past will be devastating to the welfare of the herds and sole purpose of the Wild Horse and Burro Act.