

**FINAL
Drought Monitoring 2013
WildHorseEducation.org**



Battle Mountain District, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

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Background

Battle Mountain District Wild Horse Herd Management Areas (HMA)

The Battle Mountain District has two field offices.

The Battle Mountain Field Office, Shoshone Eureka Planning Area contains 12 Herd Management Areas totaling approximately 1,800,000 acres. Battle Mountain Field Office HMAs, Augusta Mountains, Bald Mountain, Callaghan, Desatoya, Diamond Mountain, Fish Creek, Hickison Burro, New Pass/Ravenswood, Roberts Mountain, Rocky Hills, Seven Mile, South Shoshone, and Whistler Mountain.

The Tonopah Field Station contains 15 Herd Management Areas (HMAs) totaling approximately 1,200,000 acres. Find out about Tonopah Field Station HMA's, Bullfrog, Dunlap, Fish Lake Valley, Gold Mountain, Goldfield, Hot Creek, Little Fish Lake, Montezuma, Palmetto, Reveille, Saulsbury, Stone Cabin, Paymaster/Lone Mountain, Sand Springs West, Silver Peak and Stonewall.

Drought Environmental Assessment (EA) 2012

In July of 2012 the Battle Mountain District of Nevada issued a final drought management environmental assessment. The plan was proactive to address arising drought conditions on the range. The decision was fought hard by Nevada's Department of Agriculture as livestock restrictions were included in the drought plan. Several ranges began such restrictions late in 2012. The assessment process was able to curtail livestock use and preserve some of the limited forage and water resources into 2013. Other examples of how this plan effected the range include water hauls that occurred in 2012 in one HMA turning into spring restoration and the installation of tanks in that area before this years hot season to reduce the expense of water hauls.

This proactive approach was not seen in other districts. The lack of cohesive action within the BLM has created multiple issues throughout the history of the wild horse and burro program.

Identified Programmatic Challenges

The disparity in actions between districts can been seen in the Diamond Complex that has shared management between three BLM districts; Ely, Elko and Battle Mountain.

Assessments of the Diamond Complex continued after winter 2012 removal. Thirty wild horses removed from the Battle Mountain portion of the complex (plus foals) awaited release back into the Complex. The winter removal had significant weather conditions that required more animals be taken from a central location on the Battle Mountain side than anticipated. Those individuals represent a genetic component that should be returned to the range. (By non-inclusion of the off HMA land between complexes the implication is that these are separate populations defined and segregated in land use plans).

However several factors involving the lack of cohesive management have impacted the ability to protect the unique genetic structure that was present in the herd prior to the removal operation.

The objective of that operation was defined by an inventory done in November 2012 that asserted 813 wild horses resided in the area, with the upper range of AML (Appropriate Management Level) at 210 wild horses. A note was made that Outside of HMA boundaries, 311 horses currently reside, representing nearly 38% of the total horses within the Complex. The BLM intended to continue gathering wild horses above the target number so that fertility control could be given to the mares. The post gather goal is 210 wild horses (upper range of AML). It is estimated that approximately 45 wild horses would evade capture, so approximately 165 wild horses would be released back to the range. For this phase of the gather, the BLM would adjust sex ratios to favor studs at a ratio of 60:40. (Even though no scientific data exists that supports sex skewing as effective in any population control efforts this protocol has become BLM policy).

The reality of the operation was that 792 animals were gathered and removed (original goal 603) with none returned to the range due to the body condition of the animals taken at the end of the operation. As no animals were returned to the range no fertility control was done. The off HMA horses in the Newark Valley (between Diamond Complex and Triple B) were removed at the beginning of operations.

At this juncture it is reported through recent inventory flights that BLM asserts that there are again over 500 animals residing in the Complex. A good portion of the animals residing again in the Valley that sits between the two HMAs, concentrated on the Ely side of the Complex. Foaling rates are lower than normal in the area this year possibly due to the hardships faced during the drought in 2012.

Possible reasons for the failure of the operation to control population in the Complex:

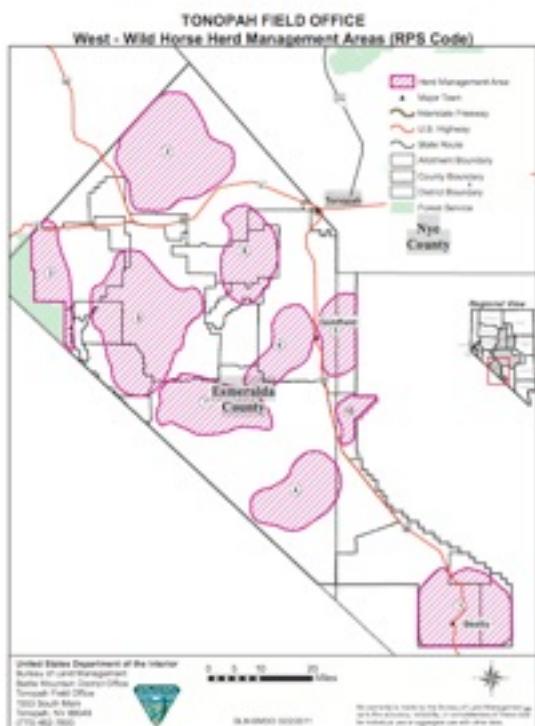
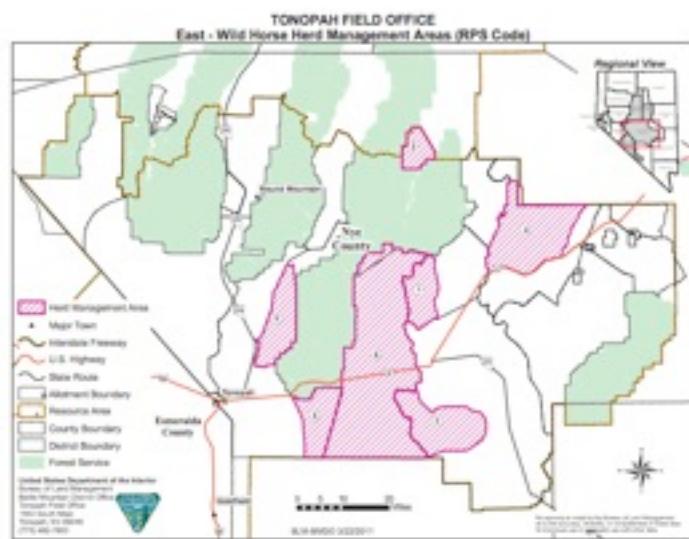
- The Battle Mountain portion of the Complex restricted livestock grazing. This practice was not followed in adjoining districts perhaps contributing to an influx of animals once a void was created.
- Surface disturbance in the Buck and Bald area due to expansion of extractive operations caused a temporary exodus from Triple B.
- The area between the HMAs was always occupied by wild horses and should not have been excluded from the HMA boundary lines regardless of the owner of that particular allotment claiming the wild horses as private property during the grace period allowed during the implementation process. (Note: no formal data is available on any movement, seasonal or otherwise, between these HMAs).

The ability to further analyze the the failure of the operation to meet expected goals is impeded again by a lack of cohesive policy. The Ely district failed to do genetic testing

during it's last removal operation. So even if animals in the Newark Valley are recaptured, the ability to assess any "home range" will be based on anecdotal evidence. Grazing continues in the Elko District that creates an unfair impact to other permittees and the range itself.

Identified Priority Areas, Tonopah Field Station, Range Assessment

The Tonopah Field Station contains 15 Herd Management Areas (HMAs) totaling approximately 1,200,000 acres. Tonopah Field Station HMA's: Bullfrog, Dunlap, Fish Lake Valley, Gold Mountain, Goldfield, Hot Creek, Little Fish Lake, Montezuma, Palmetto, Reveille, Saulsbury, Stone Cabin, Paymaster/Lone Mountain, Sand Springs West, Silver Peak and Stonewall.



The areas identified as priority for drought monitoring exist in the Western portion of HMAs managed by the Tonopah field office.



Fish Lake Valley

Background

The Fish Lake Valley Herd Management Area (HMA) is located west of Dyer, Nevada, in Esmeralda County. The area consists of 67,295 acres. Elevations range from 8,960 feet to 4,880 feet. The area receives 3 inches of precipitation in the valley bottoms to 12 inches on mountain slopes. The HMA encompasses an area 7 miles wide and 24 miles long. Management concerns center around U.S. Forest Service (FS)/Bureau of Land Management (BLM) boundaries and private land issues.

The BLM website makes the following notation on the area: *One explanation for the low animal numbers is the rumored abundance of mountain lions in the White Mountains. Habitat condition and suitability may also play a role in wild horse distribution and numbers. An emergency gather was conducted in the Fall of 2000 due to drought conditions.*

This notation appears in a press release dated January 14, 2005 on the last removal: *A total of 59 horses were gathered of which 48 (9 studs, 24 mares, 13 foals) were shipped to Ridgecrest and 11 (5 studs, 6 mares) were returned to the HMA. According to BLM Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, Amy Dumas, "The horses had surprisingly gentle dispositions and the majority was in good condition. Most of the horses were bay and sorrel while other colors included dun, paint and chestnut with flaxen mane and tail. The horses released back into the Fish Lake Valley HMA, were selected according to the best condition, size and conformation."*



Current field observation

- Wild Horses observed less than 40.
- Body condition impact noted in greater than 25% of wild horses observed. Half of observed population showing a body score of 3.5 or lower.
- Foal rate at 15.78% in observed population.
- Key grass species in lower elevations effected by drought.
- Shrub consumption evident.
- Livestock grazing in travelled area, no recent evidence.
- Movement from Forest Service/ adjoining District land evident.
- Water sources available, dispersed.
- Of note: pronghorn noted and evidence of pronghorn droppings throughout area.



Proposed Actions

Currently the field office is proposing a removal operation. AML for the area is 54 wild horses. Current population estimates are 229 animals, with an apparent flux higher or lower depending on movement from adjoining areas. Numbers to be removed have not been determined but discussion exists around 150 animals.

Recommendations

A trap, treat and release operation with removal of critical condition animals (body score of 2.5 or lower and under 14 years of age). Senior animals in critical condition should be euthanized in holding and not transported to short term. All operations must be conducted with clear transparency of action. Trap locations should include areas where animals that are transient in nature with primary purpose of treating with PZP-22. Attempts should be made to release animals as close to time of capture as possible and move trap often. All animals should be marked with hip brand at this time to facilitate inexpensive tracking of migratory patterns within the HMA.



Reasoning: A large scale removal, without complete data from adjoining districts, is likely to simply create a void of animals that will be filled through movement soon after any removal operation (see example of Diamond Complex). Removing animals of a body score of 2.5 or less will likely reduce current population enough (by as much as 25%) to eliminate immediate stress on the range. PZP-22 administration in the rest of the population will reduce stress moving into 2014. Further monitoring of marked animals should be shared with adjoining districts to create a comprehensive management plan for more efficient management in coming decades. Monitoring of animals and range health as a continued priority area will allow for implementation of bait trapping as animals move to lower elevations in winter if situation escalates. Monitoring could be facilitated through cooperative agreement with advocacy groups, students, volunteers.

The recommended operation will also reduce numbers of animals for intake into holding.



Gold Mountain

Background

The area consists of approximately 92,050 acres and encompasses an area 17 miles wide and 13 miles long, varying in elevation from 7,565 feet to a low of 4,040. This HMA is also very dry in climate with 3 inches of annual precipitation falling in the valley bottoms. The mountain tops may receive up to 12 inches.

Drought conditions in the 1990s caused several emergency removals within and around this HMA were conducted. History of emergency removals clear.

There are no records of previous BLM sanctioned removals prior to the emergency “gather” of 1996.

Information available shows an AML of 19 for horses and an existing AML of 78 for burros. Current population estimated at approximately 38 (one mule) wild horses.



Current field observation

- One wild horse physically observed. (Observation of around 20 individuals facilitated by field camera at single identified water source in the HMA).
- No evidence of current burro population (even though an AML exists for one).
- Animals noted 100% noted some environmental impact to condition. More than half the population noted at a 3 or lower.
- Very little variability evident in population.
- Only one foal identified making foal rate estimate 5%.
- Key grass species all but absent in trailing areas to single water source.
- Shrub consumption evident.
- Droppings noted from other herbivores and a small predator (likely coyote) near water source.
- Key area showed signs of key (grass) species with little new growth. Evidence of horses in key area almost non-existent.
- No evidence of livestock grazing in recent years.



Proposed Action

A helicopter gather has been proposed. The objective is to “zero out” the HMA to wild horses and reestablish a burro AML. Water/bait trapping has been rejected due to constraints of personnel, budget and time. A single identified water source will impact all other wildlife during the water trap operation that could take weeks to accomplish.

Recommendations

Based on observations that reflect that degradation of the range is historic, and evidence of water table changes (appearance of Joshua Trees), we support the removal of the existing wild horse population. Bait trapping should be attempted prior to its rejection. The range should be evaluated to immediately facilitate incremental reintroduction of burro populations.



Appendix 1, Henneke Scale

Scale from Penn State Resource: <http://sites.psu.edu/thefeedingscoop/files/2012/02/henneke-BCS-score-1.png>

