

Wild Horse and Burro Management – Then, Now, and Where To?
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Introduction - A review of Wild Horse Management Plans and Gather Plans reveals a flurry of activity in the field. There are now more variable management factors to draw on for wild horse management alternatives than ever. The six variable management factors that are being applied and blended into a variety of management alternatives are:

- Appropriate Management Level (AML)
- Selective Removal
- Fertility Control
- Sex Ratio
- Non-Breeder Herd Component
- Gather Frequency

AML – Many horse herds have had a single figure for AML that was intended for either an upper or lower limit. A single figure has been used both ways. It is now increasingly common to find the AML expressed as a range with both an upper and lower limit. The intent is to manage the herd staying within the range. The herd is to be gathered down to the lower limit. Then, when the herd increases back up to the upper limit, another gather is triggered to take the herd back to the lower limit. The lower limit is commonly 60 % of the upper, but it varies.

The lower limit should allow maintenance of a self-sustaining population, and at the same time enable a minimum feasible level of management. The upper limit must be consistent with the objective of maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance with the habitat and all other creatures in the herd management area. It would be helpful if BLM would publish the collective national AML lower limit in addition to the upper limit.

Selective Removal – Animals are removed periodically to return the herd to the lower limit of the AML range. It is possible to remove only younger animals that are more readily adoptable. Use of this removal standard will allow the older and unadoptable animals to be retained in the herd to live out their natural lives on the rangelands. That alleviates the high cost of putting animals into long term holding facilities. Unfortunately,

the adoption market has taken a nose dive, so the utility of removing adoptable animals as a population control mechanism has lost some, but not all, effectiveness during the current recession. The desired herd characteristics should be defined and used to select the younger animals that will be retained for orderly breeding stock replacement and even age structure of the herd.

Fertility Control – Fertility control has become a widely used tool for restraining reproduction. Currently, the most widely used method is PZP. The majority of herds implementing PZP vaccination use a 22 month controlled release formula administered in conjunction with a gather. Some analysis indicates this 22 month formula provides infertility at 94% for year one, 82% for year two, and 68 % for year three. Fertility returns to normal on the fourth year. BLM issued an instruction memo in March of 2009 to direct and guide the implementation of fertility control in the field. It is one of the more effectively written instruction memos I have seen. For example, it says in part “It is the policy of BLM to apply fertility control as a component of all gathers unless there is a compelling management reason not to do so.”

Sex Ratio – Some analysis indicates that modest changes in herd sex structure can slow the growth rate of the herd comparable to contraceptives. When small alterations in sex ratio are combined with fertility control, even greater reductions are seen. On the other hand, common sense suggests that herd sex ratios favoring males higher than the natural norm of 50/50 will cause increasing stress and turmoil in the herd as the males increase. That is caused by the occurrence of more aggressive males fighting for fewer females. The agitation increases the number of harems and decreases the harem size.

Non-Breeding Herd Component – A substantial non-breeding component has been designed and planned for the Nevada Wild Horse Range. The target is a breeding herd of 240 to 400 plus a non-breeding component of 60 to 100 geldings for a total AML of 300 to 500. The sex ratio is planned at 60/40 in favor of males. This is an interesting experiment that bears watching. Although I have not seen it mentioned, I think a potential benefit of the non-breeding component is as a stress reduction agent. For example, it could be used to relieve the stress and turmoil caused by sex ratio manipulation favoring males in any herd. The number of males that exceed the number of females can be gelded. That would leave the breeding herd sex ratio at the norm of 50/50. This should be given consideration so that the sex ratio manipulation could be applied to reduce reproduction rates while mitigating the potential stress and turmoil increase.

Gather Frequency – The gathering frequency can be varied from every year up to every fourth year or longer. Along with selective removal and fertility control, this is helpful to adjust and control the herd increase rate.

Jenkins Model – The model utilizes the WinEquus software created by Dr. Stephen Jenkins of the Department of Biology, University of Nevada at Reno. This population model was designed to help wild horse and burro specialists evaluate the different management alternatives under consideration for a given herd. All the recent wild horse management and gather plans use the Jenkins Model to develop combinations of factors

for evaluation and decide on a preferred alternative. It is effective and invaluable. The potential amount of combinations is so great that they are cumbersome at best without the modeling capability.

There is a recent flurry of wild horse management and gather plans that utilize the variable factors and the Jenkins Model for evaluation. There seems to be no limit on the room for creativity and the field offices are making good use of the opportunity. In fact, I would characterize the wild horse planning and management activity currently underway as one of the most energetic and sweeping biological experiments in the history of public lands. Given that state of affairs, I believe BLM is well equipped with planning tools, including population modeling, to do their job of managing wild horses.

So What's Wrong? - Why is BLM encountering so much difficulty? I believe there are two systemic problems that are bogging them down. 1) No will to stop accumulating excess wild horses in holding facilities, and 2) An absence of dependable and consistent funding to finance the management task.

Accumulating Excess in Holding Facilities – Drawing on my experience, I am convinced it is possible to manage all herds within an AML range and keep them self sustaining without necessity of exporting animals to holding facilities. It can require time and patience to get a herd shaped up to do so, but it is quite possible if you focus on that objective. I say that because my crew in the Susanville District designed an experiment with that objective explicitly stated. The experiment was implemented on the thirteen Susanville HMAs and it was successful; without three of the tools now available – Fertility Control, Sex Ratio, and Non-Breeding Component. These tools have added to the capability to make herds self sufficient.

Not only is self sufficiency possible, it is of paramount importance. That is beyond dispute. There is a saying that “If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is quit digging!” BLM needs to quit digging. By that I mean stop adding horses to the holding facilities.

In my review of management and gather plans, I have not seen any mention of how and when any herd would be managed to be self sufficient. There is plenty of evidence of the desire to restrain reproductive rates, but no evidence of intent to get closure with self sufficiency and stop adding to the holding facilities. The BLM field offices have by and large had a free ride. They have not been given ownership of the holding facility problem. Nor have they been given any responsibility to alleviate the problem by stopping the contribution of animals.

Dependable and Consistent Funding – The erratic funding history for the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program is a nightmare. BLM has for decades prepared ample gathering plans that sit on the shelf unfunded. At the 20% annual increase rate, the consequences are disastrous. Populations quickly propagate out of control. And the gathering expense is

not just deferred, it is compounded as colts start having colts. The consequences render the program insensible.

When the federal budget has gotten tight, one of the first soft spots identified for budgeting relief has been the wild horse and burro gathering funding. The gathering can always be deferred and the animals gathered another year as the thinking goes. That premise has never been true. It is less true now. But, the attitudes that drive the situation will prevail. Time and time again BLM has tried to convince the Bureau of the Budget and Congress how disastrous and explosive the situation is, to no avail. Wild Horse and Burro budgeting reform is desperately needed if the agency can be expected to perform professionally. Recourse would be to give the Wild Horse and Burro Program a status equivalent to the Entitlement Programs. They are always funded and funded first.

Congress passed the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Law in 1971. They mandated the current protection and management program. If Congress is reluctant to fund the program to manage it properly, they should get out of the wild horse business and retract the wild horse and burro protection law rather than force the Secretary and BLM to wallow in such sensitive unfunded mandates.

The situation is clearly explosive now that we see the ROAM Act looming. If that Bill is enacted, wild horses and burros will propagate unrestricted until they quickly become a pestilence like grasshopper and mormon cricket infestations. Then wild horses will be at risk of being viewed as pests as they are in Australia. What a shame it would be to relegate our National Heritage Icon to that status through neglect.

I will close with an historic anecdote. I worked in the Carson City BLM District when the Aircraft Prohibition Law was passed in 1959. I observed and followed the effect of the law over a large landscape in Western Nevada. The law stopped the private use of aircraft to gather wild horses for market hunting. It also stopped inhumane practices that were being conducted in the course of market hunting. Interestingly enough, the populations in western Nevada stabilized as cowboys, ranchers and sport hunters gathered horses without aircraft and roped colts and younger ones for their own use. The wild horse populations became stable for 12 years until the Wild Horse Law was passed in 1971. Then the populations were released and exploded without controls under the protection law. The irony is the wild horse populations stabilized in the 12 year period without costing taxpayers one thin dime.