
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Revised Plan for Horse and Burro Management at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge

April 9, 2008

Contacts

Paul Steblein, Project Leader, 541-947-3315

Amy J. Gaskill, External Affairs, 503-231-6121

Final assessment finds no significant impact on people or natural or cultural resources

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released its revised plan for managing feral horses and burros at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Nevada.

The revised final Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) documenting the refuge's Horse and Burro Management Program will guide activities until the refuge completes its Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

"After two years of planning and multiple opportunities for public review and comment, we believe our program will humanely maintain horse and burro populations at levels that will not allow their impact on habitat, wildlife and cultural resources to increase, and will lower the risk these animals pose to public safety," said Ren Lohofener, Director of the Service's Pacific Region. "We've also built in additional safeguards to help ensure we find good homes for adopted animals."

An estimated 900 horses and burros currently wander freely year-round across Sheldon Refuge, which was established in the 1930s to conserve American pronghorn antelope and other native wildlife. The combined horse and burro population, which totaled less than 400 in the early 1990s, is growing at an estimated annual rate of between 17 and 23 percent. The horses and burros consume forage and water, trample vegetation, compact soils and otherwise directly and indirectly harm native fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats. Horses and burros also pose a public safety hazard to travelers along Highway 140.

In Sheldon's high-elevation, semi-arid environments, conflicts among non-native horses and burros and native species are most severe during late summer and mid-winter and are prominent at Sheldon's limited water resources and adjacent meadows, wetlands and riparian zones. Monitoring information from 2002 concluded that 44 percent of all streams and 80 percent of the springs on the refuge were severely degraded by feral horses and burros.

Although the Service has conducted periodic gathering of horses and burros on the refuge since the 1940s, recent efforts have not kept pace with growth in the populations, exacerbating habitat damage, particularly to riparian areas.

Sheldon's Horse and Burro Management Program seeks to maintain relatively stable horse and burro population numbers at the 2007 population levels of approximately 800 horses and 90 burros until completion of the CCP, scheduled for 2010. This will be accomplished by periodic roundups and an adoption program that would move horses and burros off refuge lands in a humane manner. Based on current population and recruitment estimates, the annual removal would roughly equal 140 to 180 horses and 15 to 20 burros.

The Service plans to modify the refuge's corral system by reconfiguring large pens into smaller, safer pens, improve the water delivery system, test the use of contraceptives to reduce the rate of horse population growth, and explore techniques for marking animals. The pen modifications are expected to increase the efficiency of holding and sorting horses and reduce risks of injury to animals and personnel.

Horse gathers would occur outside the main foaling season (February through May) and would be conducted using helicopters assisted by horseback wranglers and through use of horseback wranglers alone. Burros would be gathered by baiting them into corrals with hay or other forage. Gathers would target removal and either public adoption or relocation of animals away from refuge areas of greatest concern, such as areas near Highway 140, areas with degraded riparian habitats and areas that had experienced recent wildfires. The next gather would likely occur during late summer 2008.

All animals in the gather would be processed with expert staff and a veterinarian. Horses and burros would be placed in good homes through adoption agents, who would undergo background checks before being selected. Among other things, the agents would be responsible for carefully screening potential adopters and requiring them to sign agreements, further helping to ensure that adopted animals are properly cared for and do not end up in a slaughter facility.

The Service expects to begin additional monitoring efforts to statistically quantify horse and burro population estimates on Sheldon Refuge, examine movements of animals across the landscape, and assess the ecosystem response once horses are excluded from specific areas.

The Service is working cooperatively with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, private landowners, the Nevada Department of Wildlife and others with management expertise in addressing similar natural resource management challenges, including horse and burro management on adjacent lands.

The Service expects to initiate implementation of the Horse and Burro Management Program no sooner than 30 days from now. A copy of the revised Final Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact can be obtained on the Service's website:

<http://www.fws.gov/sheldonthartmtn/sheldon/horseburro.html>. Questions can be e-mailed to sheldonhart@fws.gov.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.