

Clark Mountain Burros

California BLM Needles Resource Area

The Clark Mountain Herd Area is located in Mojave Desert in Southern California. Once designated as an HMA suitable for long-term management by BLM, the passage of the California Desert Protection Act (CDPA) in 1994 transferred the burros only perennial water source to National Park Service (NPS) in the creation of the Mojave National Preserve. NPS then issued a General Management Plan declaring a zero burro management policy for this historic herd. (1)

This transference of key habitat requirements within HMAs to other federal agencies not required to manage for wild horses and burros is often found at the root of HMAs and herds that become zeroed out. The question becomes, "Who identifies these areas in the various proposals submitted to Congress and the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture for the "special designations" of Wilderness Areas, National Parks, Preserves, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, etc., that include these "previously reserved" key habitat requirements of the wild horses and burros in their historic ranges?"



At the time of passage of the California Desert Conservation Area Plan (1980), where the Clark Mountain burros have lived in relative isolation for at least four centuries, there were 19 recognized HMAs that could be managed for burros and 14 were officially designated for that purpose within the Conservation Area alone. The combined AMLs totaled 2,747 wild burros and their available habitat was 3,500,465 million acres. (2)

Today, this same area has had over a 90% reduction in both habitat and population with only two remaining burro herds and an "appropriate management level" of merely 229 burros confined to less than three hundred thousand acres. BLM has issued a statewide AML for California of only 345 burros. (3) Shortly after the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, the estimated National wild burro population was 14,000. (4) Today, the BLM has a National AML target population of 2,695 wild burros. (5)

The Clark Mountain burros historic Herd Area was originally designated as 233,370 acres. Through BLM land use decisions and HMA designation, only 75,349 acres were deemed suitable for long-term management, a loss of 158,021 acres of habitat. Finally, the BLM approved of the 2002 NEMO Amendment to the CDCA, but only in the *Final Plan* where the public had no right to appeal, that this last amount of acreage was eliminated from any further use. Two livestock allotments continue to operate in the area. (6)

In the last environmental assessment issued by the BLM Needles Resource Office that approved of capture plans to zero the Clark Mountain burros out, BLM personnel stated that, "*Cumulative reductions in habitat available for burros and subsequent reductions in burro populations, resulting in reduced representation of this species has likely compromised their gene pool. The ability for populations to maintain genetically viable herds, with representation of their unique genetic characteristics would be lost*". (7)

Genetic tests done on the Clark Mountain burros for the BLM by E. Gus Cothran, Department of Veterinary Science at the University of Kentucky stated that, "*There is a high proportion of rare variants in this herd*." (8)

Through "management" decisions to reduce their habitat and populations, and despite knowing the Clark Mountain burros four hundred year old history and results of genetic tests that cited them as "rare", BLM admitted and approved of rendering a self-sustaining, genetically viable, historic herd, obsolete.

A significant factor cited in the Amendments, Plans, and Environmental Assessments that led to the zeroing out of the Clark Mountain burros was concern for the Threatened Desert Tortoise and its habitat, despite the burros coexisting harmoniously with the desert tortoise for hundreds of years. In fact, the state of Arizona, which has the highest remaining burro populations in the West, is also the only state where desert tortoise populations are listed as "Apparently Secure". (9)

The other factor of major concern was the expanding population of Desert Bighorn Sheep. NPS initiated plans to fence the Clark Mountain burros only spring source off for exclusive use to "reduce competition" with the reintroduced bighorns in the Clark Mountain area, whose estimated population in 2003 was approximately 76-151. (10) On February 7, 2006, the Executive Director of the California Fish & Game Commission approved of increasing the Clark Mountain/Kingston Range bighorn tag from one to two. (11)

2004 also estimated California now had a bighorn population ranging from 3,383 to 5,500 adults at the time of the survey (12). If the bighorn population has remained relatively stable, the current ratio of bighorn in California is approximately 10-16 times higher than California wild burro populations with the state population now exceeding the National burro population target.

Public outcry was significant regarding the eradication of the Clark Mountain burros and volunteers offered to supply labor and materials to pipe water from the spring until it reached the BLM Clark Herd Area managed land, but to no avail. Despite this "reasonable alternative", in January 2007, the BLM removed approximately 100 Clark Mountain burros with an estimated 30-50 still remaining with the capture plan to remove the rest of the burros authorized until 2012.

The estimated cost of their removals is approximately \$257 thousand dollars. (13)

References

- (1) Clark Mountain Herd Management Area/Herd Area, Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Clark Mountain Herd Areas Burro Removal, Fiscal Years 2007-2012, CA-690-EA04-27. Pg. 12, Department of the Interior, CA Needles Field Office, January 2007.
- (2) Wild Burros of the American West, C.R.Mac Donald, February 2007, Pg. 6. Available on line at www.wildhorsepreservation.com, Learn More-A Study In Mismanagement, Case Study #1.
- (3) Wild Burros of the American West, C.R.Mac Donald, February 2007, Attachment 5, California Burro Herd Statistics. Available on line at www.wildhorsepreservation.com, Learn More-A Study In Mismanagement, Case Study #1.
- (4) A Strategy to Achieve and Manage Wild Burros at Appropriate Management Levels, BLM, June 2000. Download May 2007 at www.saponline.org/w_horses_quotes.htm
- (5) Wild Burros of the American West, C.R.Mac Donald, February 2007, Attachment 3, National Burro Herd Statistics. Available on line at www.wildhorsepreservation.com, Learn More-A Study In Mismanagement, Case Study #1.
- (6) Clark Mountain Herd Management Area/Herd Area, Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Clark Mountain Herd Areas Burro Removal, Fiscal Years 2007-2012, CA-690-EA04-27. Department of the Interior, CA Needles Field Office, January 2007.
- (7) Clark Mountain Herd Management Area/Herd Area, Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Clark Mountain Herd Areas Burro Removal, Fiscal Years 2007-2012, CA-690-EA04-27. Pg. 31, Department of the Interior, CA Needles Field Office, January 2007.
- (8) Genetic Analysis of the Chocolate-Mule Mtn., Clark Mtn., Centennial and Slate Range feral burro herds, E. Gus Cothran, Department of Veterinary Science, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40546-0076, January 24, 2003. Received by BLM February 14, 2003.
- (9) Nature Serve Website, Distribution Map, www.natureserve.org
- (10) 2003 Desert Bighorn Council Transactions: Volume 47: Status of Bighorn Sheep in California.
- (11) Title 14. Fish & Game Commission, Notice of Proposed Changes in Regulations, Feb. 2006
- (12) 2003 Desert Bighorn Council Transactions: Volume 47: Status of Bighorn Sheep in California.
- (13) Based on figures provided in An Economic Analysis of Alternative Fertility Control and Associated Management Techniques for Three BLM Wild Horse Herds by John M. Bartholow. Cost estimates were taken from budget planning spreadsheet supplied by Linda Coates-Markle, BLM/MT (4/29/2003) as interpreted by Don Glenn, BLM/DC (6/17/2003) and Lili Thomas, BLM/NV (9/22/2003). Includes cost of removal, transportation, medical, & assumes 1 year containment with all animals successfully adopted.