

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Fact Sheet on BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Fertility Control Program
http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild_horse_and_burro/fertility_control.html

(Please note: BLM Website fact sheet statements are in *italics*. Annotations are in bold text.)

Annotations by
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The BLM has promoted and supported the development of an effective contraceptive agent for wild horses since 1978.

This is a bit of hyperbole. While various Washington, DC BLM wild horse officials have waxed hot and cold, over the years, regarding contraception, local BLM wild horse managers have been reluctant, lukewarm or completely opposed.

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*The most promising agent is a Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) vaccine that was developed in the 90's, but is not commercially available.*

**Native PZP was developed in the 1970's, not the 1990's. This vaccine will never be commercially available. The BLM was informed of this 20 years ago. In order for a vaccine with this specific use to become commercially available, it would have to turn a profit. It does not... and actually loses money for its non-profit suppliers.**

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PZP is used by BLM under an investigational exemption issued by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) held by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

The most effective formulation is a one year vaccine that must be administered annually. However, it is not feasible to gather wild horse herds every year to administer the vaccine, and it is very difficult to approach most wild horses and burros on western rangelands closely enough to allow darting.

This is partially true but, to a degree, a bit of dissembling. In order for the vaccine to become effective the first year, it has to be administered twice, over a two-week period. Thereafter, for the next two years, it must be given annually. However, after that, it can be given anywhere from every-other year to every three years.

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*So the BLM has been using a 2 year pellet that must be administered to mares after they have been captured. In addition, maximum effectiveness is not achieved unless mares are treated during a 3 to 4 month window prior to foaling.*

**This is true for the individual one-year, native PZP shots, described above, but not for the pelleted form of native PZP. Because pellets constitute a two-year vaccine, they would not have to be given just before the breeding season.**

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*This also means more mares need to be captured and released than would normally be captured and simply removed from the herd management area.*

**True. However, new formulas of pelleted native PZP are being researched that can be delivered remotely to small herds without gathering horses. However, larger herds would still require gathering and confinement in a corral during the treatment.**

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*Since 2004 the BLM has administered this pelleted vaccine to a total of 1808 mares on 47 of its 199 herd management areas, but significant reductions in population increase have not been apparent (see the table below).*

**Unsurprisingly, significant reductions in population increase have not been observed. From the start, it was pointed out by academic reproductive biologists that reduction of herds is not the strength of contraception. Stabilizing herd numbers, that is, seeking zero population growth, is the strength of contraception. Please note that Assateague Island National Seashore (ASIS) data clearly showed that, despite the fact that numbers were stabilized within two years (that is, population growth had stopped), reductions will not even begin for about 8-9 years. The bigger question should be, was growth rate slowed down? And, attendant to that question, is what percentage of adult mares did the BLM treat? PZP treatment was highly successful on the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, at the outset, but the BLM subsequently did not treat a sufficient percentage of Pryor Mountain mares to avoid new gathers, which they clearly could have done, in this case.**

**References relating to two-year population stabilization:**

**Kirkpatrick, J.F., Turner, A. 2008. Achieving population goals in long-lived wildlife with contraception. *Wildlife Research* (in press).**

**Turner, A., Kirkpatrick, J.F. 2002. Effects of immunocontraception on population, longevity and body condition in wild mares (*Equus caballus*). *Reproduction* (suppl. 60): 187-195.**

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*The BLM believes that there is potential for savings in reduced removal and holding costs through the use of fertility control in wild horses.*

**The BLM has never expressed a belief in the cost savings from utilization of fertility control, that is, the agency does not acknowledge the argument of a significant savings from application of immunocontraceptive control. Contrarily, the BLM has simply ignored several cost-benefit analyses for fertility control versus gathers, holding, and adoption programs. However, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) believes (and has clearly expressed their belief in) a significant monetary savings from using PZP.**

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When a herd is treated the savings will not be realized or apparent until the next time the herd is gathered which would normally be 3 to 4 years later.

True.

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*In areas with large horse populations that are 3 to 4 times the appropriate management level (AML), it is very difficult to capture enough additional mares to treat and release back. Once enough horses have been captured to bring the population down to AML, catching the remaining horses becomes very difficult because they are scattered over a large area, and have learned to avoid the helicopter.*

**The idea that one captures only animals that are to be removed from the range, and then complains that those horses one has not captured cannot be treated, is illogical. Naturally, they have to be captured in the larger herd management areas but not necessarily in many smaller herd management areas. Remote darting is feasible if horse herds display less "wild" character, since being able to get close enough for darting is, of course, a factor. Each herd is different in this respect, and even certain smaller herds may need to be gathered, if horses are less approachable.**

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Under ideal circumstances and with the treatment of many mares in the herd, this agent may be able to lengthen the gather cycle by one year.

What data is this statement based upon? Available data from several wild horse herds (Assateague Island National Seashore, Cape Lookout National Seashore, Little Book Cliffs Wild Horse Range, and the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range), demonstrate that if a large enough percentage of herd mares are treated, gathers may be decreased by 50%, at the very least, and, in some cases, the need for gathers can be eliminated altogether.

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*HSUS is currently working with the BLM to improve the drug and the means*

*of applying it.*

**This intended collaboration has been plagued with perpetual, long-term opposition and reluctance, on the part of the BLM. Until recently, now that numbers of wild horses in long-term holding have become disquieting (with euthanasia of healthy animals currently being proposed by the BLM), has mutual cooperation begun, in earnest.**

*The BLM is continuing research to determine the affect on population increase on the herds that have been treated and on a longer acting agent. The BLM will also continue to treat herds where practical, however. Cost savings from reduced reproduction rates will not be realized in the immediate future.*

**Had the BLM instigated an effective fertility control program in wild horse herds 20 years ago, as suggested by equine reproductive physiologists, by now the agency would have in place a viable population control methodology, as does the National Park Service.**

**Summary: The *Fact Sheet on BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Fertility Control Program* has little in the way of hard data or history to support it. On the other side of the issue, however, there is little acknowledgment within this document that the true problems are not Appropriate Management Level (AML), or the long-term holding of horses in Kansas, South Dakota, and Oklahoma, or lack of adopters, or an inability to send horses to slaughter or to "euthanize" or geld them, but rather, simply, reproduction. A vague impression is given in this BLM document that the problem has no quick fix. That is true. However, there is no acknowledgment by the agency that it was advised by equine reproductive physiologists, more than 20 years ago, to treat every mare gathered and returned to the range. However, that action was resisted by the BLM, at that time, and never accomplished. The problem of lack of natural predation, and subsequent overpopulation in some herd management areas, could have been solved by now, had the BLM taken the informed counsel of equine scientists, who have perennially had the welfare of wild horse herds and individual horses in mind.**

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**Population Level Fertility Control Treatments (2004-2008)  
Bureau of Land Management**

| <b>FY</b> |         | <b># of Mares Treated</b> |
|-----------|---------|---------------------------|
| 2004      | 15 HMAs | 763                       |
| 2005      | 10 HMAs | 423                       |
| 2006      | 12 HMAs | 333                       |

|      |                     |                  |       |
|------|---------------------|------------------|-------|
| 2007 | 7 HMAs              |                  | 133   |
|      | 44 HMAs             | 2004-2007 Totals | 1,654 |
| 2008 | White Mountain HMA  | WY               | 44    |
|      | Little Colorado HMA | WY               | 18    |
|      | New Pass/Ravenswood | NV               | 92    |
|      |                     | 2008 Totals      | 154   |
|      | 47 HMAs             | 2004-2008 Totals | 1,808 |

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