

9. NEVADA WILD HORSE RANGE

History:

Nevada's only designated wild horse range is within the Nellis Air Force Base. Established in 1962, the Nevada Wild Horse Range (Range) covers 394,000 acres out of the 2,209,326 acre Air Force Base. While the majority of the wild horses occupy lands outside of the Range, BLM's agreements with the Air Force only allow for managing horses within the Range. This is because National Security issues restrict BLM's access to many areas.

In 1990-91, BLM conducted an environmental assessment of the Nevada Wild Horse Range for wild horse suitability using water, distribution of animals and forage utilization as criteria. Based upon this assessment and an agreement with the Air Force, the appropriate management level for the Range was determined to be 1,000 horses. At the time of the assessment there were approximately 5,000 horses on the Range.

Beginning in 1985, and continuing through 1994, the BLM gathered 10,431 animals from the Air Force Base in an attempt to reduce the herds within the horse range to a level which can be sustained in the long-term with available forage and water. These gathers have decreased the herd population, but not to the point where the habitat can recover from severe impacts or where the herd is sustained in a thriving, natural ecological balance.

Findings:

BLM has faced many restraints on the Range that have complicated and limited program effectiveness. Operational priorities of the Air Force have limited access to areas where gathers should occur. There are still more horses on the Range than the range can sustain. By 1996 it was clearly predictable that horses on the range were in severe jeopardy.

Previous gathers manipulated the age structure to create a population with an approximate age of 14 years old, excluding the foal crop. These gathers disrupted normal age band structures for herd interaction, causing additional stress to already critically stressed animals. Also, there are some concerns regarding the sex ratios of the herd.

The Team also found:

- Management of all surface resources is the responsibility of the BLM per the "5 Party Agreement," currently being renegotiated to include non-military uses. The 5 Party Agreement is an interagency agreement among the Department of the Interior, Fish and Wild Service; Department of Energy (DOE), Department of Defense (DOD), Air Force; State of Nevada, Department of Wildlife; and the BLM.
- BLM's management of resources is compromised by the DOD and DOE missions. Due to national security issues, BLM cannot reasonably manage horses that migrate beyond the "designated areas." All high security classified areas are, in effect, off limits to BLM personnel while military training exercises are being conducted. During the course of this study, emergency gathers were postponed twice due to military training operations.
- Although there has been a considerable reduction in the number of wild horses on the Range, the number of horses remaining still exceeds the capacity of the range.

Recommendations:

The Team recommends:

- The team recommends the BLM not be the responsible agency for managing the horses on the Nevada Wild Horse Range and other areas on Nellis AFB.
- If the BLM is to remain the agency to manage horses and other surface resources on Nellis, the 5 party agreement must be revised to clearly define agency roles among the DOD (Air Force), DOE and BLM as they relate to management of horses and their habitat.
- Develop a Memorandum of Agreement among the DOD, DOE and DOI at the department level that defines the participation of each department in the management of resources on Nellis and identifies the funding contribution each department will make toward the management of WH&B and their habitat.
- Use the NEPA process to evaluate the feasibility of continuing management of horses on the Nellis Wild Horse Use Area. Through the NEPA process, pose and answer the following questions:
 1. Should horses remain on Nellis?
 2. If so, how many?
 3. What should be done with horses in restricted areas which serve as a reservoir of surplus horses to the area that can be effectively managed?
- BLM should take an active role in the on-going DOD/DOE environmental impact statement for implementing water development with DOD and determining BLM access to restricted areas.
- The appropriate Resource Advisory Council(s) should be enlisted to provide a broad forum for public input into the fundamental decisions regarding the long term future of WH&B management on the Nellis complex.