

Looking back at this summer's wild horse gather

By Larry Hyslop



Wild Horses seeking water at Cherry Springs before the BLM began hauling water to them. Photo from the BLM

The Bureau of Land Management has finished up one more gather in its continuous battle to keep wild horse population numbers under control. This gather was centered on the Elko-White Pine County border. The Triple-B and Cherry Creek Herd Management Areas (HMA) are south of the border and administered by the Ely District Office. The Maverick-Medicine and west end of the Antelope Valley HMAs are administered here in Elko. Also gathered was the Cherry Springs Wild Horse Territory administered by the U.S. Forest Service but gathered by the BLM. The contractor for this gather was Sun J Livestock.

The pre-gather population estimate was 2,189 horses in all these HMAs. Each HMA has been given two Appropriate Management Levels. When the horse population exceeds the high AML, this should generate another gather and the low number is the least number of horses that should be on the HMA. Gathers are designed to reduce the population to this lower number. The low AML for all these areas was 472 so the goal of this gather was to remove 1,726 excess wild horses.

Bruce Thompson is the Wild Horse Specialist for the Elko District Office. He said unfortunately, only 1,269 horses were gathered, leaving an estimated 930 wild horses in an area where the high AML is 879. Each morning began with wild horses in the open where the helicopter could slowly move them toward the trap, but later each day the horses moved in among trees and would not come out.

Four quality studs were gathered but then released to maintain the bands' vigor. Bruce feels the quality of the gathered horses was good. Twelve horses died during the gather, eight from non-gather, pre-existing problems and four caused by the gather, a loss rate less than 1% of the 1,269 horses gathered.

Since the populations of these HMAs and one Wild Horse Territory were not reduced to low AML, another gather will need to be scheduled for the near future to protect the land used by these wild horses.

A special problem this year has been the Maverick-Medicine HMA just east of the Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Pre-gather flights found 110 horses while the post-gather estimate is 50-60 horses visiting the only flowing spring, which at 10 gallons per hour, produces not nearly enough water. No livestock have used this area for ten years because of the lack of water.

Since the beginning of summer, BLM personnel have trucked 60,000 gallons of water into the area, water they luckily could get from the refuge. They will continue to haul water until snow falls. Wild horses have also impacted hot springs located on private property in the Northwest portion of this HMA.

Leslie Ellis-Wouters is the Public Affairs Officer for the Elko office. She described a small, but steady flow of visitors to the gather sites. Some Horse Advocates attend every gather but the visitors included people from this area. Unfortunately, a very few visitors were less than friendly and got nasty with BLM personnel.

BLM personnel found 20 gathered horses carried brands. Some were escapees from local ranches and their owners came to retrieve them. The rest were turned over to the state to be returned to their reluctant owners or sold.

One gathered horse carried a freeze brand identifying it as an adopted wild horse. One came in wearing a halter, another carried a halter scar. These were probably domestic horses abandoned on public land.

The Cloud Foundation, along with Lorna Moffat and Craig Downer filed an appeal against the gather as it began, but was denied. The Wild Horse Freedom Federation filed one on the gather's last day so it did not affect this gather but may affect later gathers.

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