

Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board Meeting
Recommendations to Bureau of Land Management
July 1st, 2021

Comprehensive Ecosystem

Recommendation 1: The current and likely continuance of the unprecedented drought situation in much of the Intermountain West and Desert Southwest, has revealed the need for a viable, catastrophic WH&B contingency plan for this and future protracted drought scenarios. Board recommends BLM immediately develop and implement as necessary an emergency action plan including the capacity to gather and house an unprecedented number of equids, coincidentally contacting FEMA and Interior regarding possible funding, and issuing an emergency declaration. The intent of this is to restore a thriving natural ecological balance, prevent further range degradation, and provide for habitat that exists and persists in the future.

Vote: Unanimous

BLM: Given challenges and cascading impacts posed by increasing WH&B populations, degraded land, climate change and invasive species, the Secretary of the Interior was directed to establish a task force with representation from the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and any other Bureaus the Secretary deems appropriate in 2022. The Task Force will consult FEMA as necessary for information and funding as the Task Force develops any strategies or recommendations to achieve a sustainable population through aggressive, non-lethal population control.

BLM WH&B Specialists continue to monitor habitat and animals as BLM lands are faced with the impacts of drought in various states. The HQ WH&B Program continues to hold bi-monthly calls to keep apprised of emerging situations. The information is used in conjunction with the reported drought conditions to make informed management decisions for HMAs. In FY 2022, two emergency gathers were completed due to the impacts of drought and imperiled animals.

BLM has focused its planned gathers in areas of concern to reduce the risk of emergency situations. As of September 19, BLM has gathered approximately 20,851 animals this year and removed approximately 19,011 in FY 2022, which is the largest effort to gather and remove in the Bureau's history. These removals resulted in 20 HMAs meeting AML, moving these herds toward a thriving ecological balance, and reducing impacts to the rangelands that they inhabit.

BLM is preparing a national drought policy with the goal of building long-term drought resilience of renewable resources on public lands to support the agency's mission in times of frequent and severe drought. The BLM developed a [drought focused website](#) to inform the public on how the BLM manages drought-related issues.

Recommendation 2: Board recommends BLM identify two (2) HMAs, one horse and one burro, and Forest Service identifies 2-3 territories, to implement a comprehensive gather-contraception program based on the best population models, to meet established AMLs and demonstrate successful planning/ management outcomes.

Vote: Unanimous

BLM: The BLM currently has 14 HMAs with gather and contraception-based plans, focused on field darting. Similar plans are being developed in additional HMAs by the states through the environmental analysis process. These programs are part of long-term strategies, often in the form of 10-year gather plans. Additionally, the HQ WH&B Program has recently proposed a FY2023 gather schedule that focuses on catching, treating, temporarily holding (as necessary to apply boosters) and releasing animals in HMAs that are at or near high AML, which identifies at least 10 HMAs where gather-contraception programs could be implemented to maintain AML.

USFS: The latest territory plans are including use of contraceptives with gathers. The Heber wild horse territory is planning to include contraceptives with gathers when it gets final approval later this year. The Modoc National Forest is developing a plan to incorporate both measures and looking at models when it gets completed early in 2023. AML is projected to be met in 2024.

Humane Handling and Communication

Recommendation 3: A comprehensive and standardized “gather preparation and evaluation” brochure and on-site presentation should be developed by BLM to be shared with the public observing gathers. This presentation would include but not be limited to:

- What is normal behavior/physiology for horses and burros
- What is going to happen and when during the gather
- What the end result could be (ie. Mortality and morbidity statistics)
- Process for immediate debriefing participating public post-gather

Vote: Unanimous

BLM: The BLM accepts this recommendation. The BLM is in the process of issuing a solicitation for additional public affairs support for wild horse and burro gathers in FY2023. The BLM intends to have such a product developed through this upcoming contract. Furthermore, BLM has recently published a “Gather Observation Protocol” to outline what is expected of public observers during a wild horse and burro gather operation. Public viewing and education about wild horse and burro gathers continues to be a top priority for the BLM.

Alternate Statement: The Board is aware of the public’s concerns and appreciates the thorough investigation and subsequent outcome of BLM’s efforts to properly ensure the welfare of adopted horses and burros to the best of their ability/to closure.

Vote: Unanimous

Recommendation 4: The Board recommends pursuing alternative, non-cash incentives to ensure a high standard of welfare for adopted wild horses and burros.

Vote: 8-1

BLM: In May and June of 2022, the WH&B Program conducted a series of three workshops with a diverse set of WH&B stakeholder groups to discuss various ideas for possible modifications to the current Adoption Incentive Program (AIP), including a non-cash incentive

option. A non-cash incentive might take the form of a reimbursable voucher for certain goods or services thought to be necessary for the proper care of an adopted wild horse or burro (i.e., veterinary services, training, feed, tack, equipment, materials, etc.). This would not be dissimilar to the gelding vouchers the WH&B Program currently offers individuals when they adopt an intact stallion or colt. While the gelding voucher model might be easily replicable as an incentive, it possesses certain shortcomings. Unlike a cash incentive, a voucher-based incentive would necessarily limit adopters' choices for how they can use the money. Not every adopter may require much if any veterinary care for their WH&B in the first year. They may or may not intend to pay for professional training; rather they may plan to train the animal themselves. They may or may not need additional tack, equipment, materials, etc. Such limitations on how adopters can use the incentive money would likely limit the appeal of the AIP with a corresponding impact on overall adoption demand. The WH&B Program continues to engage agency leadership on the merits of this type of adoption incentive.

USFS: The Double Devil's Garden facility provides free transportation as an incentive, particularly for adopters in the eastern US. The FS has also implemented virtual options for titling horses that are easier for adopters without sacrificing good oversight.

Organizational Structure, Advisory Board Interaction, Collaboration

Recommendation 5: Recommended that Board members attend WHB activities in order to gain a better understanding of how all portions of the program are implemented to utilize them to educate and communicate with outside stakeholders.

Vote: Unanimous

BLM: The BLM agrees and plans to coordinate opportunities for Board members to visit WH&B Program operations including field trips in conjunction with the meetings throughout the year. This will allow Board members to gain an understanding of both the on-range and off-range parts of the program.

Recommendation 5.5: Recommended that BLM utilize and involve Board members based on their individual expertise on an ongoing basis.

Vote: Unanimous

BLM: Board members currently serve as liaisons to the Research Team and the CAWP Team. The BLM will continue to engage and involve Board members in developed teams to assist in discussions and outcomes of program operations.

Recommendation 6: In order to improve the WHB program's efficiencies and coordination, especially the ability to respond to emergency situations, the Board recommends that an outside (non-government) third party be retained to study, identify and make best practice recommendations for systemic improvements in the WHB program.

Vote: Unanimous

BLM: In the FY2022 Appropriations Act, the Secretary of the Interior was directed to establish a task force with representation from the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and any other Bureau the Secretary deems appropriate to focus on achieving a sustainable program through aggressive, non-lethal population control strategy.

Recommendation 7: The Board recommends that BLM leadership direct BLM state directors to comply with national strategic WHB program plans and standardized data collections methods.
Vote: Unanimous

BLM: The BLM has formed a Focus Group comprised of State and Headquarters leadership to explore options and benefits of a strategy that includes both removal and/or an emphasis on fertility control. The Focus Group will review funding levels and risk factors (inflation costs, holding availability, etc.), approved gather schedule, overall projections, and leaders' intent to propose ways to make meaningful progress in FY2023 and FY2024. The State representation will in turn be advocates with their peers and staff, help message decisions, and build consensus. In the end, the group will emphasize actions that will advance healthy herds on resilient, healthy landscapes.