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The US Forest Service continues to struggle to get recognition that the agency shares responsibilities in the Wild horse and burro regulatory arena with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The FS has approximately 20% of the lands and 20% of the free-roaming horses and burros protected by the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. The two agencies partner in management of these animals, but the Congress allocates specific funds to the BLM but not the FS.



Figure 1 Devil's Garden mare and foal

Territories and Populations

The Forest Service has 53 Wild Horse and Burro Territories located on Forest Service lands. These territories are in 9 states, with 34 active territories and the remainder listed as inactive because they are unsuitable for a thriving horse population. There are 19 territories that adjoin BLM HMAs, and so

termed Joint Management Areas (JMAs). In 12 of the JMAs a majority the land is FS land, so the FS takes priority responsibility. This includes leading in completing NEPA evaluations, any gather or census operations, and joined management operations. Each forest is responsible for developing the cooperative relationships and guidelines for handling the JMA.

Populations are currently above the appropriate management levels of 2200 horses and 300 burros. There are estimated to be 1200 burros and 8800 horses on Forest Service lands. Additional complications include releases of domestic horses by irresponsible owners and free roaming horses that may cross borders with tribal lands. These unauthorized domestic horses may mingle with the true federally protected stock and are often impossible to distinguish from the true wild horses (burros are not implicated in the issue of domestics being released).

2023 Management Statistics and Plans

Modoc National Forest:

In compliance with a settlement reached in 2020 the Modoc National Forest gathered 400 horses in 2024. Some of the horses in the territory are expressing habituation to



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capture techniques, particularly helicopters. Options are being utilized, including the use of targeted trapping in other months to increase the number of removals. All animals are processed and adopted from the Double Devil's Garden Wild Horse Corrals. There is a NEPA and an updated Territory Plan underway to include the "middle section" that was previously privately owned. Under the revised plan contraceptive management will be applied to horses on the range. AML is expected to be reached in 2025.

The Double Devil's Garden corrals placed 96%+ of the horses from the corrals this past year. The FS asked for and received 102 horses that had been processed at the BLM corrals but designated as FS animals. The corrals also took 63 horses from the emergency gather at the North Hills Territory in Utah this fall. The majority of the transferred horses have been sent to trainers for the Mustang Challenge. The Double Devil's Corrals will also receive 150 horses from the emergency gather operation in the Malheur National Forest from the Murderer's Creek WHT. They plan to receive further shipments of FS assigned animals from BLM as space allows to facilitate moving animals as quickly as possible into private holding.

The Double Devil's Garden corrals have also processed and adopted horses removed from Gavin's Peak and will be taking animals from the Inyo NF in the summer. Adoptions are increasing in the Eastern US as people become familiar with the program in the FS and the quality of the horses that come off the range.

The Double Devil's Garden corrals utilize many hours of volunteer time in a cooperative agreement to make progress on marketing animals to the public from the Modoc National Forest.

The Corrals have been able to cooperate with Wildlife Services and NRCS on research projects that have funding from other sources. These include a stallion project looking at the effects of GonaCon while simultaneously investigating the efficacy of various adjuvants. NRCS has also been able to place tracking collars on horses that can be released back into the territory to provide data on natural behaviors, etc.

Inyo National Forest:

An updated NEPA and Territory Plan are underway. The harsh winter of 2022-2023 had some effects with increased visibility of natural losses near Mono Lake. The decision following the completed NEPA is expected



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to be available in January or February 2025. There are plans to trap horses that are off the territory on state and private lands when the Plan is in place; likely scheduled in August 2025. The removed animals will be accepted at the Double Devil's Garden corrals.

Malheur National Forest:

An updated NEPA and Territory Plan are in process and near completion. The destruction of winter forage by the Rail Fire has had a very deleterious effect on this JMA. 657 horses were identified from the JMA, mainly outside the boundaries of their normal habitats. An emergency operation to remove horse to prevent starvation due to the destruction of their normal forage began in November 2024. Trapping of horses is continuing with an ultimate goal of removing up to 400 horses from the area. The Double Devils Garden corrals has room to take 150 horses. The remainder will be processed at the BLM Burns facility. The horses that have been trapped have signs of stress from the ecological situation with body condition scores averaging 3s. The BLM and Fs have worked together to complete the new Territory Plan and to solve the issue of emergency removal of horses on the Murderer's Creek Territory.

Ochoco National Forest:

A territory Management Plan is expected to be approved soon. An appeal of the lawsuit which has delayed forward movement on the plans was heard on December 2, 2024. The ruling is anticipated in the next few weeks or months. A ruling will allow the forest to move forward with their plans.

Contraceptives are administered and planned for future management when AML is reached. There are plans to build a Wild Horse Interpretive and Teaching Center in conjunction with partners to facilitate better education and awareness of the issues surrounding wild horses and to promote adoptions. There will be corrals included with a capacity to hold and process 35 horses at a time.

Heber Wild Horse Territory:

There are currently about 1900 horses on the territory. The approximately 1000 feral horses in the adjoining Apache National Forest reported in 2023 have been under contract for trapping and removal. The Apache Nation has agreed to take some of the horse back into their custody following capture. A NEPA and Territory Plan should be approved this spring. There is a plan to gather as many as 600 horses in 2024 if the plan is approved. A corral facility to hold horses as they are removed from the Forest is planned to facilitate processing, transfer to



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larger facilities and adoptions. Funding is needed to move the process forward in a timely manner.

Carson National Forest:

The Wild Horse corrals in Bloomfield, New Mexico are closed until further notice due to the loss of all personnel at the corrals. A hiring freeze within the agency has prevented replacement of the personnel needed to manage the corrals. Homeland Habitat is active and willing to partner with Forest Service to trap and transport animals and facilitate adoptions when the corrals can be put back on line.

San Bernadino National Forest:

The Black Bear Burro Territory does not have personnel available to manage the excess burros on the territory.

Johnnie, Little Fish Lake, Red Rock, Shoshone, and Spring Mountain Territories are in the process of updating NEPAs and developing Territory Plans.



Figure 2 A group of burros captured from Big Bear Territory

Region 4 (Utah and Nevada): All territories, in conjunction with tribal lands, administered census flights in 2024. Multiple gathers and trappings have occurred and are planned, particularly in association with BLM. An emergency operation precipitated by extreme drought removed ~ 300 horses from the North Hills WHT in the fall of 2024. 67 horses were transferred to Double Devils Garden in California.

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Figure 3 Denver, a former mustang trained as a FS pack horse

(20 years and older) should be treated with GonaCon and released back into the territory. Corral space can be better utilized by capturing young horses that are adoptable and more likely to reproduce.

All areas are affected by continuing drought conditions. There is an acknowledgement that AML estimates may have to be modified to reflect the declining range conditions.

Contraceptive Use

Contraceptives are in use in some territories. Updated NEPAs and Territory Plans will include the use of PZP, GonaCon, and possibly IUDs. They will also be written to allow use of new products that will be developed through ongoing equine fertility research.

The FS has a written policy advising all territories that older horses that are captured