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News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Seeks Public Comment On Its Feral Horse and Burro Management Program

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that it is beginning a review of its feral horse and burro management program at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) in northwestern Nevada.

The Service will develop an updated Environmental Assessment (EA) to examine how the agency may best meet its objectives for the program, which includes the periodic gathering, removal, and adoption of feral horses and burros to benefit the native habitat and species the Refuge is charged with protecting.

The EA will analyze the potential environmental effects of various management alternatives. At this time, no changes are planned to the program's management objectives but the methods and strategies used to achieve those objectives may change as a result of the environmental assessment.

The Service is working cooperatively with others that have management expertise and jurisdiction over adjacent areas. This includes the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, private landowners, and the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

Sheldon NWR was established in the 1930s for the conservation of antelope (American Pronghorn) and other native wildlife species. By law, the Service must manage its refuges to achieve refuge purposes and accomplish the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, which focuses on the management of native fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Large populations of horses and burros can adversely affect native habitats; so controlling populations of feral horses and burros on Sheldon NWR is necessary to allow native species there to thrive.

The Service has identified the following issues associated with managing feral horses and burros

on Sheldon NWR. These issues will be considered in assessing how the Service may best meet its feral horse and burro management program objectives:

- Horses and burros have direct and indirect effects on native fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats on the Refuge. The current horse and burro population on Sheldon NWR exceeds the Refuge's population objectives of 75 to 125 horses and 30 to 60 burros. The Service is concerned that the habitat degradation caused by the large number of horses and burros is limiting the ability of the Sheldon NWR to meet the purpose for which the Refuge was established. Approximately 1200 horses and 100 burros are currently located on the refuge.
- The Refuge's horse and burro management program is costly to implement. A high percentage of the Refuge's budget is currently being used to control feral horses and burros instead of being applied to wildlife management activities. Expenses will be analyzed.
- The methods the Service uses to manage feral horse and burro populations – including the use of helicopters to gather horses and the handling of foals and pregnant mares – will be reviewed, as will the adoption process following the gathering.
- With increasing horse populations the number of horse and vehicle collisions on the State highway passing through the Refuge has prompted concern for the safety of the public and the horses.

Persons seeking more detailed information about the Environmental Assessment should contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at <http://www.fws.gov/sheldonhartmtn/sheldon/feralhorseburro.html>. Written comments on the refuge's feral animal program should be sent by August 22, 2006, to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 111, Lakeview, OR 97630 or e-mail to sheldon-hart@fws.gov.

The Service intends to issue a draft EA in early September, followed by a 30-day public comment period. A public meeting will be scheduled during the comment period.

The Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts.