U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex
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http://www.fws.gov/sheldonhartmtn/ 514-947-3315

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Service Seeks Public Comment on Future Management of Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is seeking public comment on the draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (draft plan) developed for Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northern Nevada. The draft plan, released today, outlines a proposed 15-year management plan that proposes guidance for improving habitats for the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife and plants, as well as wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities and environmental education and interpretation. Comments should be submitted no later than November 8, 2011.

The draft plan addresses a number of key issues, identified in public comments received during the planning process, for improving habitats for native fish, wildlife and plants on Sheldon Refuge. A significant issue is the proposal to remove all feral horses and burros from the refuge. Horses and burros are not native to Sheldon and cause considerable damage to relatively intact native refuge habitats. The costs for feral horse and burro management are also considerable, resulting in fewer funds and staff available to support the conservation mission of the Service and the purposes of the refuge.

“One of the most important issues for wildlife management at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge is the need to address the degraded habitat conditions caused by feral horse and burro populations,” said John Kasbohm, Project Leader, Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex. “Managing these populations has been required to limit damage to wildlife

habitat, consistent with the purpose of the refuge, and the draft plan proposes to fully restore native habitats and species and lower long-term operations costs by removing them."

The 575,000-acre refuge, located in the high desert of northern Nevada, with a small portion in southern Oregon, was established to conserve pronghorn antelope and other native species of the sagebrush steppe ecosystem such as sage grouse, prairie falcons, pygmy rabbits, pika and songbirds. In Sheldon's high-elevation, semi-arid environments, conflicts among non-native horses and burros and native species are most severe during late summer and mid-winter. Of particular concern are impacts to Sheldon's limited water resources and adjacent meadows, wetlands and riparian zones. Monitoring information from 2002 concluded that 44 percent of the streams and 80 percent of the springs on the refuge were severely degraded by feral horses and burros. Preliminary results from ongoing research conducted on the refuge indicate substantial impacts to both riparian and upland habitats from feral horses.

In addition to removal of feral horses and burros, the following issues are addressed in the draft plan:

- Restoring springs and other key habitats
- Managing the use of wildland and prescribed fires
- Reducing and removing encroaching western juniper
- Providing wildlife-dependent public uses
- Delineating public vehicle access to the refuge
- Adding a visitor contact station and improving campgrounds
- Recommending changes in configuration and distribution of proposed wilderness and wilderness study areas

Comments should be submitted no later than November 8, 2011. A summary of the comments received will be included in the final plan, scheduled for completion in early 2012. A copy of the draft plan is available on the refuge's Website at http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/main/docs/NV/docssheldon.htm, and printed copies are available at public libraries in: Lakeview, OR; Alturas, CA; Winnemucca, NV; and Reno, NV.

Comments and requests for a CD-ROM copy of the draft plan can be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Website: http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/main/docs/NV/docssheldon.htm;
- Fax: Attn: John Kasbohm, 541-947-4414; or
- U.S. Mail: John Kasbohm, Project Leader, Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex, PO Box 111, Lakeview, OR 97630.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit ***www.fws.gov****. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at http://www.youtube.com/usfws and download photos from our Flickr page at http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq*

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Draft Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (CCP/EIS)

Questions and Answers
September 9, 2011

What public involvement has occurred for the draft plan?

Public scoping began in early 2008. Scoping meetings were held in Lakeview, Oregon; Winnemucca, Nevada; and Denio, Nevada, in May 2008, and Alturas, California, and Reno, Nevada, in June 2008. Public comments also were solicited through distribution of three planning updates to more than 4,000 individuals on the Sheldon Refuge mailing list and meetings with key stakeholder groups. Additional informational meetings were held in July 2010 with key stakeholder groups, including Friends of Nevada Wilderness, Nevada Bighorn Unlimited, Safari Club International and the Sierra Club.

A number of comments and suggestions were made through this public involvement process, which informed further development and refinement of the CCP alternatives, including the Service's preferred alternative.

In 2011, the Service consulted with the Summit-Lake Paiute Tribal Council to discuss possible preliminary alternatives and resource concerns. The Service also met with the Nevada Department of Wildlife and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

What additional public involvement and outreach will be conducted for the Draft Sheldon Refuge CCP/EIS?

In addition to the Notice of Availability that will be published in the *Federal Register*, the Service is preparing a fourth planning update to announce availability of the completed draft CCP/EIS for review and comment and to explain changes to the preliminary alternatives included as part of the previous planning update. The fourth planning update will be mailed to more than 4,500 organizations and individuals currently on the Sheldon Refuge planning mailing list and will be posted on the Refuge's planning Web site.

A news release for the draft CCP/EIS is being distributed to local FWS, BLM, USFS, and state fish and wildlife offices, public libraries, and newspapers in Lakeview, Oregon; Alturas, California; Winnemucca, Nevada; and Reno, Nevada. Public libraries in these communities will be included on the distribution list for printed copies of the plan as well. Electronic copies of the plan will be distributed to the standard set of FWS Pacific Region and national CCP/EIS recipients, the Nevada State Clearinghouse, key Refuge stakeholder groups and local partner agencies.

Electronic copies of planning updates, public notices, news releases, the complete draft CCP/EIS and the Sheldon Refuge Wilderness Review (as a supporting document for the plan) will be posted on the Sheldon Refuge planning Web site.

Service staff in the Pacific Region developed a web-based public comment process for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, specifically to improve public involvement in the Sheldon Refuge planning process. This website was launched in conjunction with the third planning update in June 2010 and will continue to be available for the public comment period on the Draft Sheldon Refuge CCP/EIS.

In 2008, the Service issued a decision for management of feral horses and burros on Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge. Why is this issue being revisited as part of the draft CCP/EIS?

The Finding of No Significant Impact for the Sheldon Refuge Feral Horse and Burro Management Plan was an interim management decision to limit further increases in horse and burro populations on the Refuge until long-term management could be developed as part of the Sheldon Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Why does the Service consider it necessary to remove all feral horses and burros from Sheldon Refuge?

Sheldon Refuge was set aside in 1931 by Executive Order, primarily for the conservation of pronghorn antelope and other native wildlife species. The purpose was defined “as a refuge and breeding ground for wild animals and birds.” The 1997 amendments to the National Wildlife

Refuge System Administration Act established an even higher threshold, which reinforces the focus on the refuge purpose and management for biological integrity, diversity and environmental health. Horses and burros are not native to Sheldon and cause considerable damage to Sheldon Refuge's natural resources. They must be managed consistent with Refuge System policy, which requires their removal, and with the purposes for Sheldon Refuge as a refuge and breeding ground for native animals and birds and the conservation and development of natural wildlife and forage resources.

Horses and burros within Sheldon Refuge are descended from escaped and abandoned animals that were historically grazed for commercial purposes on and around what is now Sheldon Refuge. These feral animals are not native and cause considerable harm to relatively intact native refuge habitats. Horses and burros consume forage and water, trample vegetation, compact soils and otherwise directly and indirectly harm native fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats.

In Sheldon's high-elevation, semi-arid environments, conflicts among non-native horses and burros and native species are most severe during late summer and mid-winter. Of particular concern are impacts to Sheldon's limited water resources and adjacent meadows, wetlands and riparian zones. Monitoring information from 2002 concluded that 44 percent of the streams and 80 percent of the springs on the refuge were severely degraded by feral horses and burros. Preliminary results from ongoing research conducted on the refuge indicate substantial impacts to both riparian and upland habitats from feral horses.

Figure 1. Comparison of Sheldon Refuge riparian area grazed by horses (photo left) and not grazed by horses (photo right) after four months. Photo: Gail Collins/ USFWS 2008.

Regular gathers (also called round-ups) to administer fertility controls or remove horses and burros for adoption are currently necessary to maintain population levels, but these are also very costly and labor intensive. In recent years, costs for feral horse and burro management within Sheldon Refuge have exceeded $400,000 annually. Six or more permanent and seasonal staff are required to manage the populations for several weeks each year. As a result, fewer funds and staff are available for actions that directly support the conservation mission of the Service and the purposes of the Sheldon Refuge.

Figure 2. Comparison of upland habitat grazed by horses (photo left) and ungrazed by horses (photo right) after one year. Photo: Gail Collins/ USFWS 2008.

Why is the Service considering the use of auction instead of only adoption, as in the past, for horses and burros removed from the refuge?

In past years, the Service has been successful in finding adoption agents for selected animals, particularly younger and healthier animals. Complete removal would require a concerted effort resulting in the gather and removal of more than 1,000 animals over the course of only a few years. The refuge would aggressively seek agents and individuals willing to adopt these animals, but not all animals removed will be desirable for adoption and will not likely be accepted by adoption agents. To ensure successful implementation of the Service's proposal to remove all horses and burros, the option to auction animals not adopted must be available.

A wilderness proposal for Sheldon Refuge was submitted to Congress in 1975. Why is the Refuge making additional recommendations for wilderness designation?

A wilderness review to identify, study and recommend lands suitable for wilderness designation is a required element for all CCPs (Refuge Manual 610 FW 4). In light of new wilderness inventory data, the Refuge is recommending specific areas within the 1975 proposed wilderness area not be designated as wilderness. Due to changes in management direction and likely future management activities, the refuge is also recommending areas not previously proposed now be considered for wilderness designation. The overall outcome of this new recommendation is nearly the same number of acres, but in a somewhat different configuration and distribution across the refuge. These changes would affect approximately 23 percent (78,853 acres) of the lands proposed in 1975 for wilderness designation (341,500 acres) but would be replaced by nearly the same acreage (341,598 acres) of new areas being proposed as wilderness in the preferred alternative.