

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

### **Environmental Assessment for Horse and Burro Management at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge**

In accordance with the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended (42 USC 4321-4347) and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1500-1508), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the Environmental Assessment (EA) for Horse and Burro Management at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (Sheldon Refuge or Refuge). The EA will guide management of horses and burros until completion of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (currently scheduled for 2010). The EA describes the Services proposals for managing horses and burros under four alternatives.

#### **Proposed Action**

On Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Nevada, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to continue current population management of feral horse and burros until completion of a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Refuge. The current program includes gathering of animals with the aid of helicopters, motor vehicles, and horseback riders, removal from the Refuge, and adoption with the aid of adoption agents. The program has been conducted periodically, based upon availability of funding. See subchapter 2.2 for a more complete description of the Refuge's feral horse and burro population management program.

Presently, an estimated 1,600 feral horses and burros wander freely, year-round across Sheldon Refuge. They consume forage and water, trample vegetation, compact soils, and otherwise directly and indirectly impact native fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. In the Refuge's high-elevation, semi-arid environment, conflicts among feral horses and burros, and native species are most severe during late summer and mid winter, and are prominent at the Refuge's limited water resources and adjacent meadows, wetland, and riparian zones.

The core of the proposed action (alternative B in the EA) is to continue the current interim horse and burro management program on the Refuge. Also included are minor refinements to improve the program while a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Refuge is developed.

#### **Management Objectives**

Under the Refuge's renewable natural resources management plan (FWS, 1980), a number of AUM's were allotted to feral horses and burros. Since horses and burros are not native species, they do not technically fall within the framework of the Service's goal at Sheldon Refuge to manage for a diversity of native plants and wildlife. Instead, horses and burros inhibit attainment of that goal. The intent of this environmental assessment on the Service's feral horse and burro population management program is not to change the

Refuge's population management objectives (which will be addressed in the upcoming CCP), but to consolidate prior NEPA documentation, and provide the public an opportunity to review the Service's program and provide suggestions for improvements. Horse and burro management objectives are as follows:

- To maintain a manageable horse and burro population (75-125 horses, 30-60 burros) in balance with other wildlife to assure a functioning natural landscape is available for the enjoyment of refuge visitors.
- To stop range deterioration and improve wildlife habitat and watershed conditions; to reduce adverse impacts on existing water resources.
- To ensure that the Sheldon Refuge provides ample forage for all wildlife populations endemic to the area and reduce the spread of horses into key wildlife areas.

### **Herd Numbers**

The horses and burros presently found on Sheldon Refuge are domestic animals gone wild and their offspring. The current horse population is approximately 1,500 animals. Horses will continue to be allowed in the Badger Herd area (See Figure 1 and map III-12 in 1980 EIS). Approximately 75-125 horses will be managed in this one area to increase public safety by keeping the herd as far away from US Route 140 as possible, limit environmental impact from horses to one section of the refuge, and seek to limit the logistical challenge of managing horses which occur across the entire refuge. Since horses are highly territorial, they would be expected to stay within their respective areas as they have done historically. The current burro population is approximately 100 animals, and would be reduced to 30-60. These animals are being maintained in the Jackass Flat, Virgin Valley, and Bog Hot units, which border along US Route 140. The reduced numbers should also reduce potential for collisions with highway traffic.

### **Gathering**

Methods proposed for use in gathering and transporting horses and burros from the Refuge incorporate a variety of features designed to reduce adverse impacts. Removal of horses would not be allowed during the main foaling season, February through May. While June is technically a reasonable period for gathering horses on Sheldon Refuge, it is unlikely gather operations will be conducted then to minimize risks to foals. Gather operations for horses and burros would occur primarily in the summer, fall, and winter. To avoid jeopardizing wild land qualities, development of roads into proposed wilderness areas would not be allowed. Additionally, traps would be removed immediately after use to preserve the existing wild character of the area. Gathering, holding and removal of horses would be supervised by Service personnel to ensure that the animals were treated humanely. These activities may also be viewed by the public in designated areas (assuring safe distance for horses, staff and public).

The largest numbers of horses will be gathered with the use of a helicopter and 1-2 horseback riders through a private contract. The contractor sets up a trap corral and horses are brought to the trap by using a helicopter to push the animals. The contractor conducts the capture and transports the horses to the Sheldon holding facility. Another capture method that can be used is gathering horses with horseback riders without a helicopter through a private contract. This technique is similar to the helicopter gather

technique except that riders on horseback bring horses to the trap. The contractor conducts the capture and transports the horses to the Sheldon processing facility.

Capturing animals using the bait trap method is accomplished by refuge staff. Portable corral panels are setup during the winter months and baited with hay. When an animal enters the trap, a trigger is released and the door closes. Traps are checked once or twice a day depending on horse/burro activity in the area. Refuge staff then transport the animals to the Sheldon facility.

### **Processing**

Disease testing and processing of captured animals is done at the Sheldon facility (a corral system with various pen areas), following a week of rest, food and water. This consists of putting each animal in a working chute where blood is drawn to perform the Coggins disease test. A description of the animal is recorded with each animal assigned a number. A veterinarian is contracted for the processing and is assisted by the refuge staff and cooperators. The veterinarian also treats injured animals as appropriate. Animals are then sorted to ensure that mares and foals are paired and are separated from studs, and the animals are fed, watered, and allowed at least 24 hours rest before transporting. Brand inspections are done immediately before transport.

### **Transportation**

Horses and burros are transported from the Sheldon facility to the adoption agent through different methods. Professional haulers in semi-trucks transport the majority of the animals. If the distance is relatively short, refuge staff will haul animals using stock trailers behind pickup trucks or a semi-truck trailer borrowed from the BLM (Bureau of Land Management). Regulations require that animals being hauled for more than 24 hours must be rested. Animals are unloaded into a rented corral enroute, and provided with 12 hours of rest, feed, and water before resuming transport. Before any animal is transported it must have a health certificate from the veterinarian, a brand inspection, and a cleared name and address of the recipient party.

### **Adoption Process**

All adoptions are completed through adoption agents. The animals are shipped to the agents and then adopted out to their new homes. The agent is responsible for finding individuals who will give them a good home. They are also responsible for assuring that the animals do not go to a slaughter facility. Adoption agents are screened by the Service. All potential adopters must fill out a form describing their intended use of the animal and the facility where it will be kept. Other options are available to the agents such as requiring a reference from a veterinarian, or a signed affidavit. Additional detail is provided in Appendix C.

### **Improvements to the Program**

The Service continues to improve the program through a process called adaptive management. This includes a variety of minor refinements or adoption of techniques as new information is discovered that improves end results, reduces costs, and reduces risk to horses and personnel. It also includes upgrading facilities. For example, in 2007, the Service intends to modify the corral system with an improved water delivery system and

establish a number of smaller pens from large pen areas. The modifications are expected to increase the efficiency of holding and sorting horses, as well as reduce risk to animals and personnel.

## **Other Alternatives Considered**

- **Alternative A (No Action): The Refuge would discontinue the ongoing program of horse and burro population management.** There would not be any horse and burro gathers, care or management efforts, or adoption program on the Refuge.
- **Alternative C: Adoption of Horses Directly from the Refuge.** Refuge staff would facilitate horse care and adoptions instead of the current practice of contracting the service through adoption agents. Program objectives and all other aspects would be the same as Alternative B.
- **Alternative D: Conduct Horse Gathers by Horseback Techniques Only.** Horses and burros would not be gathered by the combination of helicopter and horseback riders. Burros would still be gathered with baited traps. Program objectives and all other aspects would be the same as Alternative B.

## **Modification to the Proposed Action**

A number of comments on the Draft EA (FWS 2007) encouraged the use of contraception techniques and permanent marking as a means to more effectively track horses gathered from Sheldon NWR. We have incorporated contraception as a technique category under Alternative B to explore its use, develop appropriate procedures, and apply the technique when it is determined to be cost effective and humane as part of an adaptive management approach for reaching management objectives. Horses treated with contraception would be released back to Sheldon Refuge. Marking techniques will continue to be explored and as warranted, will be implemented concurrent with the proposed action.

## **Environmental Compliance**

Environmental compliance was documented through incorporation of an environmental compliance statement attached as Appendix D in the final EA (FWS, June 2007).

## **Decision**

Following comprehensive review and analysis, the Service selected Alternative B for implementation because it is the alternative that best meets the following criteria:

- Achieves the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

- Achieves the purpose of Sheldon Refuge.
- Is consistent with previously approved management plans and associated NEPA Documents, including Refuge population objectives.
- Maintains and restores the ecological integrity of the habitats and populations on Sheldon Refuge.
- Addresses the important issues identified during the scoping process.
- Addresses the legal mandates of the Service and Sheldon Refuge.
- Is consistent with the scientific principles of sound wildlife management and ecosystem recovery.
- Facilitates priority public uses appropriate and compatible with the Sheldon Refuge purposes and the Refuge System mission.

As described in detail in the EA, implementing the selected alternative will have no significant impacts on any of the environmental resources identified in the EA.

## **Public Review**

The Draft EA was released for a 30-day public comment period beginning on April 17, 2007. The affected public was notified of the availability of these documents through a Federal Register notice, news releases to local newspapers, the Service's refuge planning website, and the Sheldon-Hart Mountain NWR Complex web site. Notices were sent to an extensive mailing list. Copies of the Draft EA were provided upon request. A copy was also available at the Lake County Library, Lakeview, OR. The Service hosted a public meeting in Lakeview, OR on May 8, followed by a refuge tour on May 9, 2007. The meeting and tour were intended to provide the public an opportunity to discuss the Draft EA with Service staff. Due to public request, a seven day extension was added to the public comment period. A summary of the substantive comments were addressed and included in appendix E of the EA.

## **Conclusions**

Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that implementing Alternative B for management of horses and burros is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of section 102 (2) ( C ) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared for this program.

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Refuge Chief, Pacific Northwest Region  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Date

This Finding of No Significant Impact and supporting references are on file at the Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex, 18 South G Street,

Lakeview, Oregon, 97630. These documents can also be found on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/sheldonthartmtn/sheldon/feralhorseburro.html>.

### **Supporting References**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1977. Finding of No Significant Impact for the Sheldon Horse Management Plan Environmental Impact Assessment. Portland, OR.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1977. Sheldon Horse Management Plan Environmental Impact Assessment. Portland, OR.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1980. Record of Decision, Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Renewable Natural Resources Management Plan. Portland, OR.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1980. Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Renewable Natural Resources Management Plan. Portland, OR.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. June 2007. Horse and Burro Management at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, Environmental Assessment. Lakeview, OR.