

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge
Implementation of CCP decision to remove feral horses and burros
Questions and Answers
August 2013

Q. What was the Service's decision for management of feral horses and burros within Sheldon Refuge?

A. Through a record of decision for the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) and Environmental Impact Statement, the Regional Director selected the Service's preferred alternative (Alternative 2) as the CCP for management of Sheldon Refuge for the next 15 years. This CCP includes direction for removal of all horses and burros from Sheldon Refuge by 2017. The decision also directs that new homes for these animals be found through adoption or sanctuary and that auction be used only if other methods are impractical or ineffective.

Q. In 2008, the Service issued a decision for management of feral horses and burros on Sheldon NWR. Why has a new decision been made?

A. The Finding of No Significant Impact for Sheldon Refuge's Feral Horse and Burro Management Plan (2008) was an interim management decision to limit further increases in horse and burro populations on the Refuge until long-term management could be developed and implemented as part of the CCP.

Q. Why will the Service remove all feral horses and burros from the Refuge?

A. The Refuge was established in 1931 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 reinforced the focus of all refuges on managing to (1) achieve the purpose of the refuge and (2) maintain the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the refuge. Feral horses and burros are not native to the Refuge and cause considerable damage to its natural resources. The feral horses and burros must be managed consistent with Refuge System policy, which requires their removal, and with the purposes for the Refuge as a refuge and breeding ground for native animals and birds and for the conservation and development of natural wildlife and forage resources.

The feral horses and burros at the Refuge are descended from escaped and abandoned animals that were commercially raised and grazed in and around what is now the Refuge. These feral animals are not native species and cause considerable harm to 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.



Figure 1. Comparison of riparian area grazed by horses (left) and not grazed by horses



Figure 1. Comparison of upland habitat grazed by horses (left) and ungrazed by horses (right) after one year (2008). Photo: Gail Collins/ USFWS

In Sheldon's high elevation, semi-arid environments, conflicts between native species and nonnative feral horses and burros are most severe during later summer and mid-winter. Of particular concern are impacts to Sheldon's limited water resources and adjacent meadows, wetlands and riparian zones. We evaluated monitoring data collected in 2002, and concluded that 44 percent of the Refuge's streams and 80 percent of its springs were severely degraded by feral horses and burros. Preliminary results from ongoing research indicate substantial impacts to both riparian and upland habitats on the Refuge from feral horses and burros.

Regular gathers (also called roundups) to administer fertility controls or remove horses and burros for adoption have been necessary to maintain population levels, but these are also very costly and labor intensive. In recent years the Refuge's costs for feral horse and burro management have exceeded \$400,000 annually. Six or more permanent and seasonal employees 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 Refuge.

Q. How many horses and burros are currently within Sheldon Refuge?

A. Based upon analysis of aerial surveys conducted during July 2013 and accounting for animals removed through gathers conducted later in August, we estimate there are approximately 831 horses and 68 burros currently within Sheldon Refuge.

Q. How many horses and burros does the Service plan to gather from Sheldon NWR, and what will happen to them?

A. As in the past, we have selected a qualified contractor to gather horses using a helicopter and specialized corral and then transport animals to the Refuge corral facility. In 2013, we intend to gather approximately 400 horses and 50 burros. In 2014, we intend to gather the remaining horses and burros to fully implement our management objectives identified in the CCP for Sheldon Refuge.

Once gathered, animals are transported by truck to Service corral facilities where they are later sorted for shipping to qualified agents. Working through agents, we have been successful in placement for 100% of the more than 3,500 horses and burros removed from Sheldon NWR over the past several decades.

Q. What is sorting?

A. During sorting, animals are marked, separated by gender, tested for disease, inspected and treated by a veterinarian as appropriate, and mares are paired with their foals.

Q. Can I observe horse and burro gathers and sorting within Sheldon NWR?

A. Gathering of horses and burros on the Refuge requires specialized equipment, training and expertise to be accomplished safely and effectively. Due to the potential disruption of those operations from inexperienced or unfamiliar observers, to improve safety for horses during the gather, and to avoid dangers to the public from horses, vehicles, and other equipment, we do not allow public access to Refuge corral facilities where sorting occurs and we temporarily close portions of Sheldon NWR to public entry while gathers are being conducted.

Upon request and as staffing allows, we will designate times and locations within portions of the refuge closed to public entry for qualified media representatives and reporters to observe and document gather operations. Public viewing and observation of gather operations and sorting may be possible at a distance from other roads and areas of Sheldon NWR open to the public.

Q. How many horses are injured or euthanized during gathering and sorting?

A. Just as with wildlife, horse and burros are injured during the natural course of their lives and frequently animals with such pre-existing injuries are gathered. In less than 1% of all cases, the severity of pre-existing injuries compels us to euthanize an animal to end their pain and suffering. Regrettably, some animals are injured while in our care. We have observed very few serious injuries and less than 2% mortality during past gathers and sorting, but we continually strive to prevent both.

Regardless of cause, and as soon as injuries are observed, we consult with a licensed veterinarian and/ or qualified independent observer as appropriate and determine the most humane course of action which can include any or several of the following: observation, veterinary treatment, rest and isolation from other animals, release onto the Refuge, or euthanasia. Through independent observers and their evaluations, we continue to make adjustments and improve our operations to minimize animal stress, injury, and mortality.

Q. Where will horses and burros removed from the refuge eventually end up?

A. The Service has contracted with agents for the placement of horses and burros removed from Sheldon Refuge. Agents are required to screen potential recipients to ensure animals have an opportunity for good homes and long-term placement as personal pets, working animals and/or rodeo stock, or in sanctuaries. All agents contracted for placement of horses and burros from Sheldon Refuge are strictly prohibited from selling those animals at auction or sending them to slaughter.

Q. In the past, feral horses and burros were removed from the Refuge using roundups and private adoptions. Why will the Service include the possibility of auction to augment those

practices?

A. In past years, the Service has been successful in finding agents for the placement of selected animals, particularly younger and healthier animals. However, due to more recent changes in the American economy it has become increasingly difficult to find people willing to provide long-term placement. Furthermore, staffing and budgets have been reduced and cannot support the annual costs of nearly \$2,000 per animal for repeated gathering, sorting, feeding, veterinary care, shipping, and placement in long-term care.

Unless the Service and contract agents can find more people willing to provide long-term homes for more than 900 horses and burros from Sheldon Refuge within the next two years, the only practical option will be sale at auction. To ensure successful implementation of the Service's decision to remove all feral horses and burros, the option to auction animals must be available.

Q. How does the Service ensure the safety and humane treatment of horses?

A. We are committed to humane treatment of all animals and constantly strive to maintain safety for horses, workers, and the public throughout gather operations, transport, and sorting at corral facilities. Humane treatment and safety during horse and burro operations are maintained by following guidelines from the Sheldon NWR CCP, including Appendix H: Standard Operating Procedures; by limiting activity within portions of the Refuge while gathers are conducted; through training and supervision of all personnel involved with gathers and sorting; and through regular independent assessment, critique, and subsequent improvement of our facilities and operations.