

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge

A Wild and Scenic Treasure



A Rare Place for Rare Species

At over 575,000 acres, Sheldon NWR is the largest intact tract of the Great Basin ecosystem left in the American West. Located in northern Nevada, Sheldon NWR was established in 1931 to protect native wildlife, especially the American pronghorn, and protects a number of rare and imperiled species, including the greater sage grouse.



Pressuring A Delicate Landscape

The refuge has also been the home of more than 1,600 feral horses and burros that are significantly damaging this fragile landscape. These once-domestic animals compete directly with wildlife for forage and water, both scarce resources in this arid environment. If feral horses and burros are not removed from Sheldon NWR, the Service will be unable to restore and conserve habitat conditions for native fish, wildlife and plants, the purposes for which the refuge was established.



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Creating a Long-Term Plan

In 2013, the Service finalized the Sheldon NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan, a 15-year management plan that identifies the best options for achieving the biological goals for the refuge. During the development of the CCP, the Service sought input from the general public through open comment periods and refuge staff engaged directly with interest groups who expressed concern about management issues, including feral horses. Some members of the public asked that feral horses and burros remain on the refuge, while others preferred to see the ecological restoration of the area.

After careful consideration, the CCP final preferred alternative selected requires the removal of all horses from the refuge by 2017. This decision was based on the best available science and information, considered public input, and reflects the most appropriate resource management for the benefit of the refuge and its native wildlife.

When removing feral horses and burros, the Service is committed to humane treatment of all animals and constantly strives to maintain safety for horses, workers, and the public throughout gather operations, transport, and sorting at corral facilities. The Service is working with adoption contractors to ensure the transparent and proper handling of horses once they leave the refuge. Guidelines for humane treatment and safety during feral horse and burro operations and for adoption contractors are outlined in the CCP and shared with the public.



Winter is a particularly difficult time for native wildlife as forage is scarce.

The Impact of Feral Horses and Burros



Though cattle grazing is not allowed on the refuge, feral horses and burros place year-round grazing pressure on the native habitats and compete with native wildlife for forage and water. Feral horses and burros have degraded almost half of the streams and 80% of springs, in addition to other riparian areas like wet meadows, ephemeral wetlands, and emergent marshes.



There have been gathers both to administer permanent fertility controls and to remove horses from the refuge. In July 2013, refuge staff counted approximately 831 horses and 118 burros living on refuge lands.

As defined in the CCP, adoption is the primary management tool for removing horses. The Service does not permanently house feral horses and burros on refuge land.

Gathers and Adoption Contracts

Approximately 415 feral horses and 50 feral burros were removed from Sheldon NWR in July and September 2013. Both the feral horses and burros will be adopted by adoption contractors who specialize in feral horse and burro adoption. Consequently, the adoption contractors are an important part of our success with removing horses at Sheldon NWR. Adoption contractors are prohibited from sending feral horses and burros to livestock auction or slaughter and are required to screen potential adopters to ensure proper placement of horses. These requirements establish accountability and ensure that the contractors and those they adopt out to do not intend to send the horses to livestock auction or slaughter.

Requirements of all potential adoption contractors include that they: pass a favorable background check; provide character and veterinary references; submit to site visits by refuge staff; screen potential adopters; and provide the Service with records on veterinary care and documentation for each adopter including contact information, a list of the horses they adopted, their experience with horses, and the facilities

they have available for the care of the animals. Adoption contractors are legally bound by the commitments they make to the Service in their contracts.

Should adoption contractors be found to be in violation of their contract, the Service would follow federal contracting guidelines to enforce the terms of the contract, which could include non-payment, removal of the vendor as a federal government contractor, or litigation.

The Service's preference is to place as many horses as possible in long-term homes through adoption. In addition to working with adoption contractors, the Service has actively solicited for adoption sources from (and will continue to work with) the horse advocate community to explore all viable adoption and sanctuary options. The Service will continue to provide information to the public. This includes providing public observation opportunities, like those attended by the press and the public during this year's gather, whenever feasible and considering the safety of both horses and people.