

**Revised Final Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact  
Horse and Burro Management at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge  
Questions and Answers  
April 9, 2008**

**What is an Environmental Assessment?**

An Environmental Assessment is an analysis of the environmental effects of a federal agency's proposed action and alternatives as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In accordance with NEPA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has prepared a revised final Environmental Assessment (EA) and a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on Horse and Burro Management at Sheldon National Wildlife. The revised final EA and FONSI follow two years of planning. A draft EA was released for public comment in April 2007, followed by a final EA in June 2007. The next month, the Service received additional information and comments and decided to take another look at the EA and FONSI. A new draft revised EA was released for public comment in September 2007. This revised final EA and FONSI are based on all of the latest information, analysis and comments.

**What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing to take at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge?**

The Service has updated its Horse and Burro Management Program to address the issue of feral horses and burros on the refuge, located in northwestern Nevada. Populations of these non-native horses and burros on Sheldon's lands are destroying habitat important for native fish and wildlife species. Horses and burros also pose a public safety hazard to travelers along Highway 140. The change in the Horse and Burro Management Program is to limit further increases in horse and burro populations on the Refuge until the Sheldon Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan is completed (scheduled for 2010).

**Why is it necessary to limit the number of feral horses and burros on the refuge?**

An estimated 900 horses and burros currently wander freely year-round across Sheldon Refuge, which was established in the 1930s to conserve America pronghorn antelope and other native wildlife. The combined horse and burro population, which totaled less than 400 in the early 1990s, is growing at an estimated annual rate of between 17 and 23 percent. The 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 and are prominent at Sheldon's limited water resources and adjacent meadows, wetlands and riparian zones. Monitoring information from 2002 concluded that 44 percent of all streams and 80 percent of the springs on the refuge were severely degraded by feral

horses and burros. Although the Service has conducted periodic gathering of horses and burros on the refuge since the 1940s, recent efforts have not kept pace with growth in the population, exacerbating habitat damage, particularly to riparian areas.

The large population of feral horses and burros also poses a risk to public safety along Highway 140, where collisions between the animals and motor vehicles have occurred.

**Does the Service intend to eliminate all feral non-native horses and burros on the refuge?**

No. The Horse and Burro Management Program seeks to limit an increase in destruction of important wildlife habitat and an increase in vehicle collisions along the highway by maintaining relatively stable horse and burro population numbers at the 2007 population level of approximately 800 horses and 90 burros until the refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan is completed in 2010. Population maintenance would be accomplished by periodic roundups and an adoption program that would move horses and burros off refuge lands in a humane manner.

The Service intends to annually gather and adopt out a limited number of horses and burros, approximately equal to the annual increase in the populations. This would result in maintenance of relatively stable horse and burro populations on the refuge. Based on current population and recruitment estimates, the annual removal would roughly equal 140 to 180 horses and 15 to 20 burros.

**How would the gathers be done?**

Horse gathers would occur outside the main foaling season (February through May) and would be conducted using helicopters assisted by horseback wranglers and through use of horseback wranglers alone. Burros would be baited into corrals with hay or other forage. Gathers would target removal and either public adoption or relocation of animals away from refuge areas of greatest concern, such as areas near Highway 140, areas with degraded riparian habitats and areas that had experienced recent wildfires.

All animals in the gather would be processed with expert staff and a veterinarian. The Service plans to modify the refuge's corral system by reconfiguring large pens into smaller, safer pens, improve the water system and explore techniques for marking animals to increase the efficiency of holding and sorting horses and to reduce the risks of injury to animals and personnel. Staff, contractors, and cooperators would continue to work carefully to minimize injury to the horses and conduct gathering operations only after the peak of foaling.

**When would the next gather occur?**

The next horse gather would likely occur during late summer to early fall of 2008.

### **How would the adoption program work?**

Qualified contractors would be selected for gathering, transporting and managing adoption of animals removed from Sheldon. Horses and burros would be placed in good homes through qualified adoption agents, who would undergo background checks before being selected. Among other things, the agents would be responsible for carefully screening potential adopters and requiring them to sign agreements, further helping to ensure that adopted animals are properly cared for and do not end up in a slaughter facility. Once the horses and burros were gathered, tested for disease, rested and transported to the contractor's facility, the contractor would provide care for them until all adoptions were completed and would coordinate transportation to their adopted homes. The Service believes that this is the best and most humane way to accomplish objectives for horse and burro management. More details on the adoption program can be found toward the end of this document.

### **Are other methods being considered to reduce the feral horse and burro populations?**

Over the next several years, a range of contraceptive techniques may be tested for feasibility and efficacy. Treated animals would be returned to the refuge. Contraception would target those horses and burros that were considered difficult to adopt out (for example, because they are too old or have physical disabilities or because the adoption market was flooded with animals). Contraception would also be used to assist in maintaining stable populations.

### **How does this revised final Environmental Assessment (EA) differ from the final released in June 2007?**

The primary difference between the two versions of the EA is the management objective for horse and burro numbers until the Sheldon Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan is completed. The objective of the June 2007 EA sought to manage the populations down to the objective numbers of the 1980 EIS – 75-125 horses and 30-60 burros. The current EA (April 2008) seeks to maintain horse and burro numbers at about the 2007 levels – 800 horses and 90 burros. There are also other differences, such as the addition of more scientific information in the environmental analysis (refuge reports and published scientific articles) and responses to comments received since the June 2007 EA was posted. The summary section of the EA (pages 1-6) catalogue the differences among each version of the EA.

### **What alternatives were considered before the final was selected?**

Before selecting Alternative B-2 (described below), the Service considered the following alternatives for reducing the feral horse and burro population:

- **Alternative A (No Action): The Refuge would discontinue the ongoing program of horse and burro population management.** Under this alternative, there would not be any horse and burro gathers, care or management efforts, or adoption program. Horse and burro populations would be allowed to grow, checked only by disease, predation, weather, forage, other natural forces, and vehicle collisions.
- **Alternative B-1: Status Quo (Ongoing Program Management).** Under this alternative, current standard procedures would continue for managing horses and burros to bring their numbers in line with official Refuge program objectives. Refuge objectives established in 1977 and 1980 are to maintain populations of 75-125 horses and 30-60 burros. Therefore, the Service would attempt to remove as many horses and burros as quickly as possible (several hundred per year) to bring numbers in line with objectives. Horses and burros would be gathered using helicopter/horseback riders, horseback riders alone, and baited traps (corrals). All animals would be processed with expert staff and a veterinarian. Horses and burros would be placed in good homes through adoption agents. Contraception and marking techniques would be reviewed and used, if feasible, and treated animals would be returned to the Refuge.
- **Alternative B-2: Modified Status Quo – Proposed Action (Ongoing Program Management on an Interim and More-Limited Basis).** Under this alternative, most current standard procedures for managing horses and burros would continue, but on a more-limited basis, until completion of the Refuge CCP (currently scheduled for 2010). On an annual basis, the Service would gather and adopt out a limited number of horses and burros, approximately equal to the annual increase in the Refuge’s populations. Horse gathers would occur through use of helicopters assisted by horseback wranglers and through the use of horseback wranglers alone. Burros would be gathered through use of baited traps (corrals). All animals would be processed with expert staff and a veterinarian. Horses and burros would be placed in good homes through adoption agents. Contraception and marking techniques would be reviewed and used, if feasible, and treated animals would be returned to the Refuge.
- **Alternative C: Adoption Directly from Refuge.** Under this alternative, Refuge staff would facilitate horse care and adoptions instead of the current practice of contracting the service through adoption agents. Refuge objectives and all other aspects of the horse and burro management program would be the same as Alternative B-1 or B-2.
- **Alternative D: Conduct Horse Gathers by Horseback Techniques Only.** Under this alternative, horses and burros would be gathered solely through the use of horseback riders. Helicopters would not be used. Burros would still be gathered with baited traps (corrals). Refuge objectives and all other aspects of

the horse and burro management program would be the same as Alternative B-1 or B-2.

### **Why are horses and burros not priority species on Sheldon?**

National wildlife refuges are established for the protection of native wildlife and habitat. Sheldon, located in the northwestern corner of Nevada, occupies over 575,000 acres of high desert habitat and is managed for native plants and wildlife. This 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 the refuge’s purposes, which emphasizes conservation of pronghorn antelope and other native animals and plants.

### **What is the history of horses in northwestern Nevada?**

Prior to these lands becoming a national wildlife refuge, ranchers in the area raised European horse breeds as working stock and as remounts for the U.S. Cavalry. When the need for saddle horses diminished at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, these horse herds were released on lands that are now the Sheldon refuge and other public lands where they became free-roaming animals. Active interbreeding of feral horses with ranch horses continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A more thorough coverage of the history can be found in the EA.

### **Why should horses be removed from Sheldon?**

Relevant federal law and Service policy require that we manage non-native animals to prevent damage to native wildlife habitat and other resources. These horses and burros have no natural predators in the West, other than an occasional mountain lion. Horse and burro populations increase at a very high rate when compared to populations of mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and other native species for which the refuge was established.

During the past ten years, the non-native horse populations have greatly increased, causing damage to upland areas and water sources on the refuge. The herd’s growth rate is very strong, averaging about 17 percent to 23 percent annually. With an estimated current population of about 800 horses and 90 burros, about 155-200/year animals must be removed each year just to keep the current population stable.

The horse and burro populations on Sheldon are causing negative impacts to native wildlife and their habitats. Conflicts over scarce water in this desert environment include trampling of vegetation along stream banks and at springheads, physical exclusion of other species by dominant stud horses and burros, and contamination from feces and urine. Horses and burros also cause habitat degradation by trampling and destroying

vegetation in the upland areas. Together, these areas provide important habitat for native species such as pronghorn, mule deer, bighorn sheep, sage grouse, waterfowl, many species of native songbirds and mammals. This habitat is most valuable to wildlife when it is not grazed by livestock and has healthy native vegetation. Removal of this natural cover allows native predators to more easily locate and kill the species that depend upon that cover to hide, especially during the fawning and brooding seasons.

Cattle grazing was removed from Sheldon in the early 1990s because of many of these same conflicts with wildlife. At that time, the population of non-native horses was much smaller (200-300 animals) and their impact was not as severe. However, these populations have increased greatly in the past 15 years and habitat damage and conflicts with wildlife have continued to rise.

Horses and burros removed from Sheldon Refuge are found good homes for adoption.

### **How long has horse and burro management occurred on Sheldon?**

Federal agencies have managed these herds for more than 70 years, and the current program to control horse and burro populations is a continuation of that effort. We have endeavored to meet Service and NEPA policies in implementing feral horse and burro management. Horse removal has been addressed in earlier management plans and associated NEPA documents including the 1977 Sheldon Horse Management Plan, Environmental Impact Assessment; the 1980 Sheldon Renewable Natural Resources Management Plan, Final Environmental Impact Statement; and the 2000 Environmental Action Memorandum (which updated previous documents). These documents are being further updated through this environmental assessment (EA). The EA also provides much detail and history on horse and burro management activities. All of these documents are available at the refuge website:

<http://www.fws.gov/sheldonthartmtn/sheldon/horseburro.html>

Sheldon's Comprehensive Conservation Plan, which is in early stages of development, will also address horse and burro management (scheduled for completion in 2010).

### **How would the horse removal program affect visitors?**

Visitors travel to Sheldon from diverse domestic and international locations to view native pronghorn, sage grouse, mule deer, bighorn sheep and other native wildlife species in their natural habitats. Other visitors enjoy viewing horses and burros on the Refuge. A number of visitors have expressed concern about the impacts that horses and burros are having on native plants and animals.

There are more than 30 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) herd management areas within a 200-mile radius of the refuge where people can view horses and burros on BLM and United States Forest Service (USFS) lands managed for this purpose. In fact, to reach the Refuge, visitors travel through miles of lands managed by the BLM for horses and burros.

The safety of the public and horses/burros is a primary concern of the Service. Collisions between vehicles and horses and burros on Highway 140 have been a regular occurrence and will continue unless the number of feral horses and burros along the highway are reduced. For example, from Fall 2005 through Spring 2006, fourteen collisions between vehicles and horses and burros occurred on Highway 140. After horses were reduced in that part of the refuge, there were no more collisions with horses in the following year. The management plan would target horse and burro gathers and removals, and either public adoption or relocation of animals away from refuge areas of greatest concern, including Highway 140.

### **How does the Sheldon removal and adoption program work?**

The Refuge staff seeks to ensure that all horses receive good homes by working with organizations, individuals, and private contractors who serve as adoption agents for the Service. Horses are rounded-up using standard techniques, such as helicopters working with horse-back wranglers or horse-back wranglers alone guiding horses to a trap corral. Burros are captured using temporary corrals baited with food. Animals are sorted and transported to our holding facilities where food and water are provided. If there are mares with foals, they are given preferred treatment to make sure they are matched-up and safe. All horses and burros are tested for diseases, inspected and treated for injuries, and receive a brand inspection before being transported to adoption agents or adopters. Animals are handled by horse/burro experts and a veterinarian is onsite or on call during operations. The agency is making every possible effort to gather, adopt and transport animals in a humane manner. Handling horses and burros can be dangerous for both humans and animals. Death and severe injury for horses during the roundup have been less than one percent, and none known for burros. A great deal of information on the program is available in the revised final Environmental Assessment.

Sheldon Refuge has operated a very successful program of finding homes for horses and burros. Before any horses are released, a rigid screening process and a thorough background investigation are completed on the adoption agents. They are then responsible for screening potential adopters to ensure the horses will be taken to good homes. A cooperative agreement or contract is negotiated and signed by both parties to ensure that it is clearly understood that these animals must be adopted to qualified homes and that they will not end up in the slaughter market. We are continually seeking to improve the adoption process through our own programmatic review and public comments received during the public involvement process for the EA. Our areas of focus include screening and verifying successful adoptions, and interceding when they are not.

Persons interested in adopting these beautiful animals can contact the certified adoption agent below:

Carr's Wild Horse and Burro Center, 4844 Couets-Carr Rd, Cross Plains, Tennessee 37049. E-mail: [carrsholding@aol.com](mailto:carrsholding@aol.com)

People interested in becoming adoption agents are invited to send an inquiry to the attention of Paul Steblein, Refuge Project Leader, at [sheldon-hart@fws.gov](mailto:sheldon-hart@fws.gov)

We also realize the difficulty in finding adoptive homes for older horses, so we are assessing the viability of using contraceptive techniques that would allow unadoptable animals to live out their lives on the refuge while lowering the reproductive rate of the herd.

**There have been allegations that the adoption agents for Sheldon are shipping horses to the slaughterhouse. Is this allowed?**

Sheldon and its adoption agents take careful precautions to prevent Sheldon horses from ever going to slaughter. Adoption agents are screened to make sure their purpose is to find good homes for the horses. The adoption agents screen candidate homes to make sure potential adopters know how to care for horses, have the facilities and will not sell the horses for slaughter. The contract and cooperative agreements specifically require the agents to prevent horses from going to slaughter. The Service reviews contractor performance and conducts investigations, cooperating with other law enforcement authorities as necessary, to follow up on allegations of impropriety. The welfare of our adopted horses is important and we make every effort to ensure that good homes are found.

**Some individuals have alleged that the 2006 Sheldon horse gather resulted in many dead foals and adult horses. What were the results of the gather?**

Sheldon completed a gather in late June 2006 after the peak of foaling (the vast majority of foals were a month or older). The staff, contractors, and cooperators worked carefully to prevent injury to the horses but there is an inherent risk whenever activities are undertaken with this many livestock. A total of six horses died: two would have died independent of the gather (birth defect and breeched birth); the remaining four deaths represent a mortality rate of about 1 percent, which is normal for horse gathers. That said, we continually evaluate our program for improvement.

**Where can I find the Revised Final Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact?**

These documents can be found at:

<http://www.Service.gov/Sheldonthartmtn/Sheldon/horseburro.html>

A bound paper copy of the documents is available for viewing in the Lake County Library, Lakeview, Oregon.

Questions should be e-mailed to [Sheldon-hart@fws.gov](mailto:Sheldon-hart@fws.gov) or mailed to Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 111, Lakeview, Oregon 97630.