

Feral horses and burros at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge: Questions & Answers

Background

The topic of horses and burro management on public lands continues to be a highly contentious issue throughout the United States. Complicating the issue are various mandates and directives for each land management agency (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service) of which the public is often unaware and which often appear to the public as contradictory.

Management of what is now the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge has varied considerably since initially established by Executive Order in the early 1930s. This was due to various Federal agencies which had jurisdiction and their evolving missions, laws, policies, and management plans over the years. Today the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (Sheldon NWR) is administered solely by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) under the direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S. Code [U.S.C.] 688 dd-688 ee, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997).

The Administration Act established a common mission and management direction for all wildlife refuges across America. The Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to “administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.” The primary purposes for Sheldon NWR are:

“...as a refuge and breeding ground for wild animals and birds...” Executive Order (EO) 5540 dated January 26, 1931

“...for the conservation and development of natural wildlife resources and for the protection and improvement of public grazing lands and natural forage resources...” EO 7522 dated December 21, 1936.

As a feral, non-native animal causing detrimental impacts to natural forage resources and wildlife habitats, the presence of horses and burros on Sheldon NWR is in direct conflict with the Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the purposes for Sheldon NWR. Management of feral horses and burros within Sheldon NWR is directed by national policies and guidance for fulfilling the Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, by the specific purposes for which the Refuge was established, and by individual decisions and plans for management of the Refuge, specifically the Refuge System Manual and the 2012 Record of Decision for the Sheldon NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

While horses and burros generally roam freely within the confines of the Sheldon NWR boundary fence, they are in fact non-native and feral. The term “wild” only applies to horses and burros in designated areas outside Sheldon NWR that are managed by the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service in accordance with the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Current Situation

The Service is responsible for managing Sheldon NWR to maintain healthy and diverse populations of native fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of present and future generations of Americans. Management policies and guidance for fulfilling these directives allows for non-native, non indigenous, or exotic animals to remain within wildlife refuges only when there is no conflict with refuge purposes or management objectives (7 RM 8, 601 FW 3). National Refuge System policy specifically directs that feral horses and burros be removed from Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (7 RM 6). Feral horse and burro populations are being removed in accordance with 2012 Record of Decision for the Sheldon NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

For more information about our planning process for the Sheldon NWR CCP and the Service's Record of Decision, visit: <http://www.fws.gov/pacific/planning/main/docs/NV/docssheldon.htm>

Question and Answers

Q. Where did the horses and burros on Sheldon NWR come from?

A. Horses were initially brought to the area of Sheldon NWR by emigrants, ranchers, and miners. Many escaped, were lost, or simply turned loose. By the end of the 19th century ranchers commonly turned out domestic stock with feral horses to ensure quality stock that were occasionally rounded up and sold.

Q. Why does the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) consider horses and burros to be not native?

A. We define non-native wildlife to be any animal not historically occurring in the United States except through the intervention of man, intentional or otherwise (7 RM 8). The horses we see today are descended from those initially introduced to the Americas by 16th century Spanish explorers, and because the horses on Sheldon NWR are descended from animals which initially escaped, were lost, or were abandoned, they are in fact both non-native and feral.

Q. How many horses and burros are currently on Sheldon NWR?

A. Current populations are estimated to be 800 horses and 60 burros, following gathers conducted in 2012 and based on analysis of results from earlier aerial surveys.

Q. Do horses and burros enter and/or leave Sheldon NWR?

A. We regularly monitor and maintain the Sheldon NWR boundary fence to limit the movement of horses and burros to and from the Refuge, especially areas adjacent to wild horse and burro Herd Management Areas administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). However, on rare occasion we observe animals within Sheldon NWR which are obviously domesticated, which have been gelded, or are visibly marked/branded—including horses marked/branded by the BLM. Whenever possible, the owner is contacted so they may take appropriate action. The few individual horses captured within Sheldon NWR that were marked as belonging to the BLM were returned to the agency.

Q. How can the Refuge be sure impacts to riparian areas and other habitats are caused by horses and burros?

A. After livestock grazing was discontinued throughout Sheldon NWR in 1994, a number of studies were completed or are ongoing that have measured various negative impacts from feral horses to riparian areas, upland areas, springs, and other important habitats. These impacts not only reduce the quality of these habitats, they are in turn detrimental to the very wildlife Sheldon NWR was established to conserve and protect.

Q. If horses are causing so many problems, why don't other large animals like bighorn sheep or pronghorn cause similar problems?

A. Large native wildlife in Sheldon NWR are typically limited to certain areas or habitats and have a variety of natural influences such as weather and predators (including mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, and people), which prevent populations from becoming large enough to cause serious impacts. Horses are very adaptable and can live nearly everywhere within Sheldon NWR, and natural influences do not effectively limit their numbers.

Q. Under what authority does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gather and remove horses from Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge?

A. The authority to gather and remove horses from Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge is provided through the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (16 U.S. Code [U.S.C.] 688 dd-688 ee, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997) and Executive Orders 5540 and 7522 which established Sheldon NWR and its purposes.

Management of feral horses and burros is further directed by relevant federal regulations (including control and disposition of feral animals, 50 C.F.R. 30.11- 30.12) and Refuge System policies (including "Feral Horses and Burros," 7 RM 6).

Contrary to what many people believe, The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 does not apply to management of feral horses or burros within National Wildlife Refuges.

Q. When is the next gather scheduled to occur?

A. We are planning to gather up to 400 horses in 2013. Additional gathers will occur annually as funding and staffing allow until all horses and burros have been removed from Sheldon NWR.

Q. Will areas of the Refuge be closed to public access during the gather?

A. Yes. As in the past, those areas where gather operations are conducted will be closed to public entry. Gathering of horses and burros on the Sheldon NWR 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, we temporarily close areas of Sheldon NWR, including some roads, while gather operations are being conducted to improve safety for horses during the gather and to avoid dangers to the public from horses, vehicles, and other equipment.

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 up to 400 horses. We will continue to regularly gather horses and burros to meet our management objectives for removal by 2017 identified in our Sheldon NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan.

Once gathered, animals are transported by truck to Service corral facilities where they are later sorted for shipping to qualified adoption. Working through adoption agents, we have been successful in adoption for 100% of the more than 3,000 horses and burros removed from Sheldon NWR over the past several decades. However, if adoption becomes impractical or ineffective, we may use sale or auction as a last resort.

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. 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.

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. 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.

We allow one qualified independent observer to document and evaluate both the gathering and sorting. Public viewing and observation of gather operations and sorting may be possible from a distance from other roads and areas of Sheldon NWR open to the public.

Q. How can I adopt a horse or burro from Sheldon NWR?

A. Horses and burros from Sheldon NWR are made available for adoption through approved adoption agents under contract with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

To inquire about horses from Sheldon NWR available for adoption, contact:

Carr's Wild Horse & Burro Center
4844 Coutts Carr Rd
Cross Plains, TN 37049
CarrsHolding@aol.com
615-654-2180

J&S Associates
1789 Highway 43 South
Pelahatchie, MS 39145
(601) 546-2555

To inquire about burros from Sheldon NWR available for adoption, contact:

Peaceful Valley Donkey Rescue
PO Box 2210
Tehachapi, CA 93581
(866) 366-5731
adopt@donkeyrescue.org