



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service - Pacific Region

Sheldon-Hart Mtn National Wildlife Refuge Complex

High Desert Home of Sage Grouse and Antelope

Sheldon NWR

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Horse & Burro Management

On September 12, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a revised draft Environmental Assessment for managing non-native horses and burros at Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR). In late June 2007, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a final Environmental Assessment (EA) and draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) addressing management of horses and burros at SNWR. In mid-July, the Service received additional comments on the EA and FONSI and in late-July, new information became available, prompting the Service to develop a modified proposed management program and revised EA.

The Service's proposed action seeks to continue horse and burro gathers and adoptions due to concerns that additional population growth would increase animal/human health and safety problems and increase damage to valuable and sensitive Refuge habitats and cultural resources. The purpose of this revised Draft EA is to describe and evaluate a range of reasonable alternatives to: prevent an increase in damage to valuable and sensitive Refuge habitats, including riparian areas and areas which have experienced recent wildfires; prevent an increase in collisions with vehicles on Highway 140; and conduct gathers and adoptions in a humane manner. The Service identified and evaluated five alternatives for managing horses and burros until a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Refuge is completed.

Public Comment Period Extended 2 Weeks

The revised draft EA, provided below, is now available for public review and comment until October 9, 2007. Written comments can be e-mailed to sheldon-hart@fws.gov or mailed to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 111, Lakeview, OR 97630.

Questions should be e-mailed to sheldon-hart@fws.gov

- [News Release](#)
- [Revised Draft Environmental Assessment PDF \(1.37 MB\)](#)
- [Questions & Answers PDF \(36 KB\)](#)
- [June 2007 Environmental Assessment PDF \(633 KB\)](#)
- [June 2007 Draft Finding of No Significant Impact PDF \(995KB\)](#)



Before Horse Gather, August 2004



After Horse Gather, August 2005

These above two photographs were taken one year apart at the same site, Big Spring Creek on Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge. The first photograph was taken in August 2004 at the time of a large horse gather on Big Spring Butte which resulted in the removal of 293 horses. These horses were placed in homes through adoption. The photograph shows the extensive damage to vegetation along the riparian area caused by horses. The second photo was taken one-year later (August 2005) at the same position and angle, and shows the response of vegetation from reduced grazing pressure of horses. Woody vegetation and other responses of the ecosystem will take many years for restoration from the damage.



This photograph was taken in September 2002 at Big Spring Creek. The tall vegetation was protected from grazing by the cage on the left side of the photograph. Stubble height of vegetation outside the cage was 4 cm, and 35 cm inside the cage, nearly 10 times the height. The intensity of horse grazing pressure was high until the gather in late 2004. Additional photo comparisons are available from other sites.

Why are horses and burros not priority species on Sheldon?

National wildlife refuges are established for the protection of native wildlife and habitat, and any use of refuge lands and waters, by law, must be consistent with Refuge purposes. 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 purpose, which gives priority to native animals and plants.



These are a few of the 800 horses on Sheldon NWR

What is the History of Horses in Northwestern Nevada ?

Prior to these lands becoming a national wildlife refuge, ranchers 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 th 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 th century. A more thorough coverage of the history can be found in the EA.

Why should horses be removed from Sheldon?

Service policy requires 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 kill. Horse and burro populations increase at a very high rate when compared to populations of deer, antelope, and other native species for which the refuge was established.

The non-native horse population has greatly increased during the past fifteen years, 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. These areas provide important habitat for native species such as pronghorn, mule deer, bighorn sheep, sage grouse, waterfowl, many species of native songbirds and resident 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 consequently 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. See question below for a description of removal and adoption program.

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 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 to update 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.Service.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 will 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 the other native wildlife species in their natural habitats. Many 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/burros on Highway 140 have been a regular occurrence unless their numbers along the highway are reduced. For example, during the fall thru spring period of 2005/2006, 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.

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 usually 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 transported to adoption agents or adoptees. 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 Environmental Assessment.

Sheldon Refuges 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 process for the draft 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 Coutts-Carr Rd , Cross Plains , Tennessee 37049 . E-mail: carrsholding@aol.com

People interested in becoming adoption agents are invited to send an inquiry to the attention of Paul Steblein, Project Leader, at 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 will allow unadoptable animals to live out their lives on the refuge while lowering the reproductive rate of the herd.

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