6. Stonewall HMA

The Stonewall HMA is located 20 miles south of Goldfield and is approximately 25,790 acres in size. The area is characterized by three major vegetation types: pinyon-juniper in the high mountains, various sagebrush species on the lower mountains, and spiny menodora, shadscale, winterfat, and Bailey's greasewood on the alluvial fan. Grass species comprise only about five percent of the vegetation in the HMA. Habitat in the Stonewall HMA is well suited for burro use, but contains little forage suitable for horse use.

The AML for the Stonewall HMA was established at 50 horses and 25 burros. This HMA also borders on the Nevada Training and Test Range and both burros and horses cross the fenced boundary. A 1981 census located 530 horses and 42 burros in the HMA, but these numbers fluctuate greatly because of the movement across the Nevada Training and Test Range. Only 24 horses and 5 burros were found and removed in the 1996 emergency gather. The AML of 50 horses and 25 burros has been found to exceed greatly the carrying capacity of the range in the Stonewall HMA.

The Stonewall HMA is located on the east central boundary of the Montezuma Allotment, with its eastern edge adjacent to the Nevada Training and Testing Range. The boundary with the Testing Range is partially fenced and wild horses and burros frequently cross the boundary causing horse numbers to fluctuate seasonally. The HMA is not fenced on the north, south, and western boundaries, however the U.S. Highway 95 just to the west of the HMA is fenced.

The Stonewall HMA is noted for its mountainous and rugged terrain. There is inadequate water throughout the HMA for wild horses. Only two reliable water sources exist. These are Stonewall Falls and a small unnamed spring on Stonewall Mountain. Little water is available north of the HMA and none is available south of the HMA, keeping these animals within the HMA on the north, west and south, with dispersal only available to the east. These few available water sources in this mountainous terrain cause some competition between burros and bighorn sheep. Details of the waters and vegetation of the Stonewall HMA are in the EA and RHE.

Lastly, there is a severe shortage of forage for wild horses. Ecological Site Inventory data determined that only five percent of the vegetation is comprised of grass species. The vast majority of the vegetation is various shrub species, some of which are palatable to burros. There is not enough forage to support both burros and cattle.

During the 1996 drought, BLM rangeland specialists and wildlife biologists conducted monitoring of rangeland resources to determine the extent of the drought and effects on vegetation, water sources, wild horses and burros, and wildlife. They found "no grasses in the woodlands, and utilization on remaining grasses throughout the HMA was severe. Grasses were not observed in the HMA in zones under 8" precipitation." They observed 14 wild horses and 1 burro in the HMA at Stonewall Falls. All the horses had "all their ribs and hipbones showing, quite thin." Six mules

seen later were thin, but in better condition than the horses. At Stonewall Falls, 6 wild horses, 1 mule, and 3 bighorn sheep were found dead and partially eaten, as mountain lions use the area to hunt. The team concluded that "likely grasses left in the area do not contain enough substance and nutrition to sustain life. . . .[There does not appear to be] enough forage to sustain wild horses. [We] recommend only managing for burros" (Valerie Metscher, Rangeland Management Specialist, Tonopah Field Station, 30 September 1996).

Because of these stark conditions in 1996, a drought emergency wild horse and burro gather was conducted. Twenty-four head, including 1 burro and 1 mule, all in poor condition, were removed. No wild horses, burros or mules remained in the HMA after this gather, though emigration from Nevada Training and Testing Range is common. During a 1997 wild horse and burro gather of Nevada Wild Horse Range, the Las Vegas Field Office removed 4 wild horses and 10 mules from along the fence line between Stonewall HMA and Nevada Training and Testing Range. There have been no gathers of the Stonewall HMA since 1996.

Issue 1. Due to an oversight in writing the 1997 Tonopah Resource Management Plan (RMP), burros were not allotted AUMs in the Montezuma allotment.

The initial determination as to whether or not burros existed in the HMA was based on a census flight conducted by the Las Vegas District on June 8, 1974. This was a one-day fixed-wing flight that covered much of 2,787,244 acres of Esmeralda and Southern Nye Counties now administered by the Tonopah BLM. It appears that a one-day census flight covering such a vast area would likely miss many burros and wild horses. Research from decades of census and distribution flights indicates a sighting rate for burros from a helicopter at only 50 percent (Oyler, personal communication). The 1973 flight that established HMA boundaries and the wild horse and burro populations present in Esmeralda County occurred from a fixed-wing aircraft at a higher altitude and faster speeds than a helicopter. It is highly probable that burros were present throughout each of the Montezuma Complex HMAs, but were not sighted or documented. Typically, when aircraft fly over wild horses and big game species, the animals are easily spooked and will run, making them easier to spot from the air. But burros will stand quite still, making it much more difficult to spot them from the air. Therefore, only wild horses were identified in the Montezuma Peak HMA. However, it is very likely that burros have resided in the HMA since the early days of the town of Goldfield to the present. It is most likely the black burros currently found in the Montezuma Peak HMA descended from burros that were fenced into the Montezuma Peak HMA in the 1970s.

Photograph 3. taken from the Central Nevada Museum in Tonopah depicted burros in Goldfield in 1910 of which is now the Montezuma Peak HMA.

History of Burros in the Montezuma Peak HMA

The town of Goldfield was founded in 1902 with the discovery of gold, and with the miners came burros.

> "Roaming the desert near Goldfield were hundreds of burros. The young boys and a few of the braver girls would start out on Thursday night after school in search of

> their favorite burros in order to have it corralled so that they could spend Saturday and Sunday riding them. Many a mother was scared petrified upon entering her woodshed to be greeted with the braying of a burro" (Cline 1970).

Goldfield has had stray burros inside the city limits from the early 1900s up until the border of the town of Goldfield was fenced in 1967. The agreement for the town fence drawn up by Esmeralda County, dated 28 April, 1966, states: "WHEREAS, for a number of years a very serious problem has existed in the town of Goldfield, Nevada, due to the running at large of certain livestock, consisting of cattle, wild horses, burros, etc. . ."[1] From the time the town was fenced in 1967, cattle, wild horses and burros have been excluded from roaming through the town of Goldfield.

The following information provides evidence that burros resided in the Montezuma Peak HMA during 1971 when the Wild Horse and Burro Act was passed:

- Burros were documented from the early 1900s up to 1967 when the town was fenced, roaming freely through the town of Goldfield, which lies between the Montezuma and Goldfield HMAs. The boundaries of the Montezuma Peak and Goldfield HMAs are very close together (between a half a mile and 2 miles apart) at the town of Goldfield, the burro's source.
- Both HMAs have springs that could support wild horses and burros close to the town of Goldfield and outside the town fence. After the town was fenced, wild horses and burros would have most likely resided in both the Montezuma Peak and Goldfield HMAs.
- Many springs in the Montezuma Peak HMA are closer to the town of Goldfield (less than a mile) than the Goldfield HMA springs. Springs in Montezuma Peak HMA available for wild burro use include West Spring, Slaughter House Spring and other waters on the eastern edge of the HMA. These waters are less than a mile from the town center. Waters in the Goldfield HMA include Tognani and Willow Springs at 5 and 7 miles respectively from town, making it more likely that burros were residing in the Montezuma Peak HMA after the 1967 town fence was built.
- The nearest HMA to the Montezuma Peak HMA with burros is the Bullfrog HMA, approximately 50 to 60 miles south of the Montezuma Peak HMA. The two allotment boundary fences (Magruder and Montezuma Allotments) between the Bullfrog and Montezuma Peak HMAs on the west side of the U.S. Highway 95 were fenced in 1972 and 1983. [2,3] Both fences tie into the U.S. Highway 95 fence on the east and mountains on the west blocking livestock, wild horse or burro movement northward. There may have also been some emigration from California until the 10-mile long Lida Wash Allotment Fence was built in 1974 [4] and the Sarcobatus Flat Fence was built in 1978.[5]
- Burros currently reside in the Montezuma Peak HMA.

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1 The "Goldfield Townsite Fence," Range Improvement file number 3566.

2 The "Montezuma Division Fence and Cattleguard," Range Improvement file number 3666.

[3] The "Montezuma/Magruder Allotment Fence," 13 miles long, Range Improvement file number 3684.

[4] The "Lida Wash Allotment Fence," Range Improvement file number 3754.

5 The "Sarcobatus Flat Fence," Range Improvement file number 3697.

- Until 1968, there was free movement of cattle, wild horses, and burros between both the Montezuma Peak and Goldfield HMAs. There was access for burros and wild horses across U.S. Highway 95 between Tonopah and Goldfield up until the summer of 1968 when both sides of the U.S. Highway 95 were fenced. This fence ends at the town of Goldfield. The Draft Esmeralda-Southern Nye Resource Management Plan (Esmeralda-Southern Nye RMP) signed November 16, 1984, states under Montezuma Allotment, on page 165: "Livestock, wild horses and burros compete for forage and water in the Montezuma's" (the name of the mountains contained within the Montezuma Peak HMA). Burros were apparently residing in the Montezuma Range earlier than November 1984, when the document was signed.
- During the drought gathers, gather notes state that at the close of the gather in 1996, "no burros remained on the Goldfield, Montezuma Peak or Stonewall HMAs," yet burros are still to be found within these HMAs today. Helicopter census fights in 2000 and 2006 found burros in the Montezuma Peak HMA. These burros most likely did not come from the Bullfrog HMA or from California, but were missed by the gathers in 1996 and 1997.

The above facts make it very likely that burros resided in the Montezuma Peak HMA in 1967 and burros were most likely still there in 1971 when the Wild Horse and Burro Act was passed. Burros were documented in close proximity of the Montezuma Peak HMA in 1967 and in the HMA in the early 1980s (Esmeralda Southern Nye RMP), in 1993 and 1997 censuses, and observations from 1998 to the present. Additionally, there is a group of approximately 10-15 black burros that historically reside just north of Goldfield on the west side of U.S. Highway 95 in the Montezuma Peak HMA. For additional information on the history of burros in the area, contact the Tonopah Field Station.

4. <u>Goldfield HMA</u>

The Goldfield HMA is located 26 miles south of Tonopah, east of U.S. Highway 6/95 and east of the town of Goldfield. It is approximately 61,500 acres in size. The entire HMA lies within the boundaries of the Montezuma Allotment. Like the Montezuma Peak HMA, the Goldfield HMA is characterized by Great Basin vegetation with a small influence from Mojave Desert vegetation dominated by shrubs with little grass, particularly in dry years. Precipitation across the HMA averages between 3 - 8 inches per year. Habitat in the Goldfield HMA is well suited for burro use, but contains little forage suitable for horse use.

The burros of the town of Goldfield are legendary to the area. Historical accounts relate many stories of miners and their burros, children's races and games on their pet burros, and the pranks of youths from Goldfield and Tonopah sneaking over to each other's towns and stealing burros back and forth. The March 16, 1907 issue of the *Goldfield Gossip* proudly announced that the first baby born in Goldfield was a burro foal. Miners relied on burros, and the railroad companies that sprang up in the area relied on mules for construction and maintenance. For additional information on the history of burros in the area, contact the Tonopah Field Station.

The AML for the Goldfield HMA was set at 125 horses and 25 burros. A census in 1988 counted 597 horses and 52 burros. In 1990, 428 horses and 87 burros were counted. This HMA is adjacent to the Nevada Training and Test Range and although the boundary is fenced, many horses and burros freely move between the Nevada Training and Test Range and the Goldfield

HMA. This movement may account for the high numbers of animals found in some years. In 1990, 308 horses were removed, and in 1994, 147 horses and 46 burros were removed. During the 1996 gathers, 182 horses and 170 burros were removed. The majority of the horses were extremely thin and starving due to lack of forage prior to these gathers of 1990 and 1996. The burros were in better health due to their ability to browse shrubs. See Photos 6.0 and 7.0 below. The AML of 125 horses exceeds the amount of available forage in the Goldfield HMA.

The eastern edge of the Goldfield HMA borders the Nevada Training and Testing Range. For security reasons, a fence was constructed along that boundary in 1985. Prior to fence construction, wild horses and burros had free range between Nevada Training and Testing Range and Goldfield. However, Burros and horses still cross the Nevada Training and Testing Range boundary into the Goldfield HMA. The 1968 construction of the fence along U.S. Highway 95 effectively cut off equid movement to other HMAs across the highway. After the fences were erected, wild horses and burros were confined to an area that could no longer support their numbers. Gathers were necessary to prevent over-utilization of the range resources and imminent starvation.

There is no current data on the genetic variability of the wild horses and burros in Goldfield HMA. However, due to the ease and frequency of movement between Goldfield and the Nevada Wild Horse Range (Nevada Training and Testing Range), it is unlikely that inbreeding is occurring in either horse or burro populations.

5. <u>Bullfrog HMA</u>

The Bullfrog HMA is located in the southernmost portion of the assessment area. It is 95 miles south of Tonopah, and is approximately 150,000 acres in size. Sixty-six percent of the HMA is within the Montezuma Allotment, with the rest encompassing the Razorback and Springdale 2 Allotments. The eastern edge of the HMA borders the Nevada Training and Testing Range and burros range easily across both areas. The U.S. Highway 95 fence divides the HMA in half, and the town of Beatty, with a population of about 1,000, lies almost directly in the center of the HMA. The area is characterized by Mojave Desert vegetation and provides habitat for the threatened desert tortoise and the Amargosa toad. The climate and habitat of the HMA has historically been only suitable for burros, and very few wild horses have ever resided there. Several aerial census flights have been conducted of the area. See Tables 10.0 and 11.0 in Section V. D. for a history of the burro populations and gather operations that have occurred in the Bullfrog HMA.

The AML for the Bullfrog HMA was set at 185 burros and 12 horses. However, in 1994, 432 burros, 2 horses, and 1 mule were counted inside the HMA. At the same time, cattle also used portions of the HMA, but at numbers below their preference. Between 1995 and 1996, 917 burros were removed from inside and outside the HMA, including throughout Pasture 5 of the Montezuma Allotment. In 1996, range resources were being over-utilized by wild burros and they were beginning to suffer from lack of forage.

The Bullfrog HMA has very little available grass, except for some annual grasses, that make it unsuitable horse habitat. In fact, very few wild horses have ever been sighted in the Bullfrog

HMA, and those seen may have been transients from neighboring HMAs. Burros, however, prosper on the habitat available in Bullfrog HMA, as they are capable of foraging on many of the shrub species found throughout the Complex. Furthermore, there is little overlap of forage use between cattle and burros. Cattle have not grazed the southern Montezuma Allotment since prior to 1995. Cattle currently use the portion of the Razorback Allotment in the Bullfrog HMA. The Springdale 2 Allotment has only a 2 head of cattle ten-year grazing lease.