

March 16, 2020

**Submitted online via the CARA database**

M. Stephen Best  
Forest Supervisor  
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests  
Heber Wild Horse Territory Comments  
P.O. Box 640  
Springerville, AZ 85938

**RE: Scoping Comment – Heber Wild Horse Territory Plan**

Dear Mr. Best:

Friends of Animals<sup>1</sup> submits these comments in response to the United States Forest Service, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, January 2020 Proposed Action for the Heber Wild Horse Territory Management Plan. As an initial matter, Friends of Animals would like to commend the Forest Service for its extensive analysis concerning the history of the area and the methodologies utilized in developing this Proposed Action.

Friends of Animals has two overarching concerns with the proposed Plan. First, the appropriate management level of 50 to 104 wild horses on over 19,700 acres of land is far too low. Second, the Forest Service's proposed use of a myriad of invasive and unnecessary fertility controls, including PZP, GonaCon, SprayVac, and sterilization, should be removed from the Plan altogether.

According to the Land Management Plan for the Apache Sitgreaves National Forests, "[t]he Heber Wild Horse Territory is considered a special area by the Forest Service."<sup>2</sup> The Heber

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<sup>1</sup> Friends of Animals is a non-profit international advocacy organization incorporated in the state of New York since 1957. Friends of Animals has nearly 200,000 members worldwide. Friends of Animals and its members seek to free animals from cruelty and exploitation around the world, and to promote a respectful view of non-human, free-living and domestic animals. Friends of Animals regularly advocates for the right of wild horses to live freely on public lands, and for more transparency and accountability in BLM's "management" of wild horses and burros.

<sup>2</sup> United States Forest Service, Land Management Plan for the Apache Sitgreaves National Forests, MB-R3-01-10, August 2015, revised October 2016, at 118.

Wild Horse Territory (WHT) was established in 1973 for the express “purpose of providing use by and for the protection of wild horses.”<sup>3</sup> However, by proposing to maintain this wild horse population at numbers as low as 50 wild horses while preventing the wild horses from reproducing, in some cases permanently, will not protect the wild horses. Rather than looking for ways to limit or get rid of the wild horses that the Forest Service promised to protect, the agency should concentrate on trying to determine why, for instance, the Heber wild horses tend to stray outside the WHT rather than staying within the area, which, according to the Forest Service data, appears to have an abundance of forage and water sources. If the Proposed Plan is implemented, Friends of Animals urges the Forest Service to consider answering some of these questions before moving forward with any future removals or fertility control actions.

Friends of Animals further urges the Forest Service to allow the Heber wild horse population to achieve a population that would permit long-term genetic viability. As the Forest Service acknowledges, to avoid inbreeding depression in wild horse populations, a minimum herd size of 50 effective breeding animals (a total population size of 150 to 200) is recommended.<sup>4</sup> Despite this knowledge, the appropriate management level for the Heber WHT was set at a range of 50 to 104 wild horses. Friends of Animals urges the Forest Service to reconsider this range as it is far too low to assure genetic viability.

Notably, the Proposed Action provided to the public neglects to provide a sufficient overview of livestock use within the Heber WHT. Indeed, it merely notes that the “territory overlays two livestock allotments named Black Canyon and Heber, 60 percent of the Black Canyon allotment and six percent of the Heber allotment overlap with the Heber Wild Horse Territory.”<sup>5</sup> It goes on to list permitted livestock grazing within the Heber WHT, including King Phillip, Sharp Hollow and Stermer pastures of the Black Canyon allotment and parts of the Gentry and Bunger pastures within the Heber allotment.<sup>6</sup> The proposal fails, however, to include any analysis concerning the number of livestock within the Wild Horse Territory, the impacts of livestock on the Wild Horse Territory, and the amount of forage and water livestock use within the Wild Horse Territory. Friends of Animals urges the Forest Service to include this information in any future environment documents and to

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *See, e.g.*, Proposed Appropriate Management Level Determination for Heber Wild Horse Territory, at 33, 44; see also Bureau of Land Management’s Wild Horse and Burro Handbook; National Academy of Sciences (noting that the minimum population size should be at least 5,000 wild horses)..

<sup>5</sup> *See* United States Forest Service, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, Proposed Action, Heber Wild Horse Territory Management Plan, January 2020, at 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

provide a full analysis of livestock use and impacts within, and possibly around, the Wild Horse Territory.

Moreover, the Proposed Action fails to analyze the positive impacts of wild horses.<sup>7</sup> The Forest Service cannot ignore the positive contributions of wild horses, including their ability to both prevent and mitigation catastrophic wildfires. Friends of Animals urges the Forest Service to consider these positive impacts in both its appropriate management level determination and its future management actions.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and please contact me if you have any question or concerns.

Sincerely,

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<sup>7</sup> See Craig C. Downer. *The Horse and Burro as Positively Contributing Returned Natives in North America*. *American Journal of Life Sciences*. Vol. 2, No. 1, 2014, pp. 5-23. doi: 10.11648/j.ajls.20140201.12.