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Questions and Answers

Population Control

Does the BLM use fertility control?

Yes, the BLM has promoted and supported the development of an effective contraceptive agent for wild horses since 1978. The most promising agent is a Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) vaccine that was developed in the 1990s, but is not commercially available. The PZP vaccine is used by BLM in cooperation with the Humane Society of the United States under a research protocol.

A major part of the Proposed Action is to gather as many of the wild horses as possible within the HMAs in order to apply fertility control. Only small numbers of horses need to be removed from within the Rock Creek and Little Humboldt HMAs as they are still within the upper limits of their established AMLs but the over-arching goal of the gather is to treat as many mares as possible and release them back to the HMAs while maintaining the AML for each area.

How are fertility control and adjusting the sex ratio implemented?

Fertility control treatments and modification of sex ratios of released animals would slow population growth and could increase the time period before another gather was required. If the gather efficiency exceeds 70 percent (980 animals) then the following management actions would be implemented to the degree possible while still achieving and maintaining the established AMLs:

- All mares selected for release, including those previously treated with fertility control, would be treated/retreated with a two-year PZP-22 or similar vaccine and released back to the range. Immuno-contraceptive research would be conducted in accordance with the approved standard operating and post-treatment monitoring procedures. Mares would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.
- Studs selected for release would be released to increase the post-gather sex ratio to approximately 60 percent studs in the remaining herds. Studs would be selected to maintain a diverse age structure, herd characteristics and conformation.

Animals would be removed using the following selective removal strategy to the extent possible:

- first priority – age 5 years and younger
- second priority – age 6-15
- third priority – age 16 and older

Post-gather, every effort will be made to return released horses to the same general area from which they were gathered.

Why doesn't the BLM just implement fertility control rather than removing wild horses from the range?

The BLM's policy is to apply fertility control to all wild horse mares returned to the range when site-specific environmental analysis supports its use. However, an ideal fertility control agent has not yet been perfected for use in wild horses. For example, the two year PZP-22 vaccine has its highest level of efficacy and longest length of control when applied during a three to four month window prior to foaling, primarily November through February. When applied during the summer, PZP-22 has shown to be effective for only about one year.

Application requires the mare to be physically captured, restrained and vaccinated. Field darting with the one year PZP vaccine is not practical for most of the free-roaming herds in the west. To substantially slow herd growth rates, most of a herd's mares would need to be captured and vaccinated with PZP-22 every two years during the winter. Other limitations with respect to PZP-22 are: (1) it is not commercially available and (2) the BLM's use of the vaccine is limited to an investigational exemption issued by the Food and Drug Administration and held by the Humane Society of the United States.

Has the BLM considered other fertility control methods or procedures?

The BLM has increased research funding devoted to the development of a longer acting PZP vaccine. An ongoing research project with the University of Toledo-Health Science Campus is aimed at extending the efficacy of the current PZP-22 vaccine.

The BLM has recently initiated research through the United States Geological Survey and Oregon State University to study a fertility control vaccine called SpayVac. Based on recent research, SpayVac may have the potential to slow population growth rates for as long as 4 to 5 years.

Why doesn't the BLM just geld (neuter) the stallions?

Research has shown that while neutering males can slow population growth to a minor extent, a single intact stallion can breed a large number of mares. Therefore, the BLM continues to concentrate its research on finding an effective and long-lasting fertility control agent for mares.

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