

**SOUTH STEENS
GATHER PLAN
FOR THE
SOUTH STEENS HERD
MANAGEMENT AREA**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DOI-BLM-OR-B060-2010-0005-EA**

Bureau of Land Management
Burns District Office
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Hines, Oregon 97738

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This scenario would still improve forage species vigor, cover, and eventually allow plant communities to provide for maximum plant density and site capability. This would allow progress toward meeting riparian and upland objectives outlined in South Steens AMP.

12. Soils and Biological Soil Crusts

Lacking the use of immunocontraception, wild horse populations in the HMA would increase more rapidly than in the Proposed Action. Potential effects to soil and biological soil crust resources would be expected to be less beneficial, but similar to the Proposed Action with the following explanation. Reducing wild horse numbers more slowly than in the Proposed Action would subsequently slow the reduction of impacts to soil and biological soil crusts. Soil and biological soil crust cover loss and compaction would still be expected to decrease in those areas near water sources where horses are forced to concentrate. Lower populations of horses would result in less hoof traffic, thereby decreasing impacts to soils and biological soil crusts.

13. Recreation

Effects from gathering excess horses would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

14. Visual Resources

Effects from gathering excess horses would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

C. Alternative 3: Remove Excess Wild Horses – Adjust Sex Ratio in Favor of Males

1. Noxious Weeds

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

2. Special Status Species

Since the rate of return for wild horses to exceed AML is about the same timeframe as in the Proposed Action, effects to SSS would be the same as described for the Proposed Action.

3. Migratory Birds

Since the rate of return for wild horses to exceed AML is about the same timeframe as in the Proposed Action, effects to migratory birds would be the same as described for the Proposed Action.

4. Water Quality/Riparian Areas

Under this alternative effects and duration would be similar to those of the Proposed Action. However, while numbers of horses and reproductive capacity would be reduced, it could be expected gelding bands may create a situation in which more localized impacts may be seen in riparian areas. Geldings tend to congregate in larger numbers than stallion/mare bands.

5. Wild and Scenic Rivers

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

6. Wilderness

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

7. Wilderness Study Areas

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

8. Wild Horses

Effects of gathering would be the same as described under Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

If selection criteria leave more stallions than mares, band size would be expected to decrease, competition for mares would be expected to increase, recruitment age for reproduction among mares would be expected to decline, and size and number of bachelor bands would be expected to increase.

Skewing the sex ratio of stallions v. mares would result in a destabilization of the band (stallion, mare and foal) structure moving it from five to six animals to three animals. Social band structure will be lost resulting in combative turmoil as surplus stallions attack a band stallion trying to capture his mare. This could result in the foal being either killed or lost. The mare and foal will not be allowed to feed or water naturally as the stallion tries to keep them away from the bachelor bands of stallions, resulting in stress to the mare during her lactation condition.

The gelding aspect of Alternative 3 is the only irreversible action considered. A study of gelding dominant stallions in the Beatys Butte HMA (Lakeview District) found no reduction in population growth. Potentially gelding could reduce population growth rates; however, it is unknown what percentage would be necessary to accomplish this reduction. Gelding would change the individual behavior of each male horse, and many would be expected to form bachelor bands. Breeding age mares would be expected to breed with available stallions regardless of the presence of geldings in the HMA.

9. Grazing Management

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action. See Vegetation Section for a discussion regarding utilization and effects.

10. Fish and Wildlife

Since the rate of return for wild horses to exceed AML is about the same timeframe as in the Proposed Action, effects to fish and wildlife species would be the same as described for the Proposed Action.

11. Vegetation

Since the rate of return for wild horses to exceed AML is about the same timeframe as in the Proposed Action, effects to vegetation would be the same as described for the Proposed Action.

12. Soils and Biological Soil Crusts

Since the rate of return for wild horses to exceed AML is about the same timeframe as in the Proposed Action, effects to soils and biological soil crusts would be the same as described for the Proposed Action.

13. Recreation

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

14. Visual Resources

Effects would be the same as Alternative 1: Proposed Action.

D. Alternative 4: No Action

1. Noxious Weeds

The increase in horse numbers above the AML could lead to areas of higher horse concentrations causing a 50 to 90 percent increase in bare ground due to overgrazing and providing more niches for noxious weeds to establish and spread. Areas of high horse concentration include riparian areas, springs, and reservoirs.

2. Special Status Species

Heavy grazing use along perennial streams would cause water quality and riparian condition to deteriorate, directly affecting redband trout habitat.