Data Submitted (UTC 11): 5/28/2025 5:53:46 AM
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Organization:
Title:
Comments: Formal Objection to the USFS Portion of the Pryor Mountain Joint Herd Management Area Plan and Wild Horse Gather Plan - Project #67845
Submitted via: USFS CARA System
Date: May 27, 2025

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Dear Objection Reviewing Officer,

On behalf of The Cloud Foundation (TCF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting and preserving wild horses and burros on our public lands, I respectfully submit this formal objection to the U.S. Forest Service's decision under the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range Joint Herd Management Area Plan and Wild Horse Gather Plan (Project #67845).

TCF submitted timely and specific written comments on this plan, including:
- April 29, 2022, comment letter on the Proposed RMP Amendment
- April 23, 2023, comment letter on the Environmental Assessment (EA)
- December 16, 2024, formal protest on the final EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

These documents were submitted during the designated public comment periods and form part of the official administrative record. We reference them here in support of the objections outlined below and do not resubmit them.

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? Objection #1: Inappropriate Authorization of GonaCon on USFS Lands

The USFS decision authorizes the use of GonaCon, a fertility control drug that causes permanent sterilization after as few as two injections, according to BLM-funded studies (see Baker 2023, submitted with TCF's 2023 comments). The EA fails to analyze the irreversible nature of GonaCon and its profound impacts on reproductive capacity, herd dynamics, and wild behavior. Furthermore, the EA does not address the unknown effects of administering GonaCon to mares that have been managed long-term with PZP. No peer-reviewed studies have examined the potential compound or cumulative impacts of transitioning between these fertility control methods in wild populations.

The decision to authorize GonaCon without fully analyzing its effects violates NEPA and undermines the Wild Horse and Burro Act's mandate to manage wild horses as wild and free-roaming, using minimum feasible management.

? Requested Remedy:
Withdraw authorization of GonaCon use on USFS-administered lands and conduct a new, science-based analysis, including peer-reviewed studies showing its long-term and potentially permanent impacts.

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? Objection #2: Failure to Consider Reasonable Alternatives - Public-Private PZP Program

TCF, along with experienced volunteers and scientists, has offered to collaborate in implementing a PZP-only fertility control program based on documented success dating back to 2001. The EA failed to meaningfully

consider this alternative, despite its proven efficacy, reversibility, and alignment with federal mandates for humane, minimum-impact wild horse management. Public-private partnerships not only reduce costs but also provide the flexibility and labor force needed to meet the narrow seasonal windows required for effective darting. This is especially important as federal staffing and funding for on-the-ground fertility control efforts continue to decline.

This failure to consider a less invasive and viable alternative violates NEPA's requirement to analyze reasonable alternatives.

? Requested Remedy:
Revise the plan to fully evaluate and prioritize a PZP-only fertility control alternative, administered through partnerships with trained volunteers and NGOs, with emphasis on genetic management and kinship data (see WHIMS data referenced in TCF's 2022 and 2023 comments).

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? Objection #3: Reliance on Incomplete and Inconsistent Range Data - New Information

In accordance with 36 CFR § 218.8(d)(2), this objection incorporates new information that became available after the close of the comment period. This includes:

- PMWHR AIM Indicators Dataset (2012-2022)
- 2021 Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health (IIRH) data
- 2023 FOIA Data Compilation from PMWHR Data Request
- 2012-2021 PMWHR AIM Dataset

These deficiencies, based on data not available to the public until after the comment period, reinforce our conclusion that the USFS's decision is not based on the best available science and fails to meet NEPA's "hard look" requirement.

Additional AIM data from 2012-2021 (Attachment 4), also obtained via FOIA, reinforces the absence of scientifically sound analysis in the Environmental Assessment. Despite nearly a decade of monitoring data, the agency failed to conduct a trend analysis or evaluate ecological change over time-an omission inconsistent with NEPA's "hard look" requirement. Furthermore, the distribution of sampled plots confirms a geographic bias, with underrepresentation of high-elevation zones that are essential to the herd's seasonal range use.

? Requested Remedy:

Suspend implementation of population reduction or fertility control programs until an updated, independent, peer-reviewed range analysis is completed for USFS-administered portions of the PMWHR. Require ecological assessments that isolate variables, include climate and grazing history, and meet NEPA's "hard look" standard. In addition, much of the range and health data was only made available to the public through FOIA after the EA comment period closed. This raises questions as to whether the agencies had even reviewed or incorporated that data at the time of their decision. The EA also fails to identify specific monitoring objectives or a clear framework for adaptive management going forward, further undermining the reliability of its conclusions.

The EA does not evaluate the current condition of water sources across the range, despite known issues with disrepair and seasonal inaccessibility. These failures in water infrastructure directly influence where horses concentrate on the landscape, which in turn affects forage use and vegetation health. Ignoring these key ecological linkages leads to an incomplete assessment of range conditions.

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? Objection #4: Impacts on Wild Behavior Not Analyzed

The EA narrowly defines "behavior" as reproductive or activity-based, ignoring broader elements of wild horse social structure - including long-term family bonds, leadership roles, and natural dispersal. GonaCon and other long-acting or permanent fertility control drugs-such as those that cause sterilization or suppress natural hormones-threaten these behaviors, fundamentally altering what it means for these horses to remain wild under the law. This objection does not apply to reversible methods like native PZP, which preserve natural social dynamics.

The 2013 National Academy of Sciences report emphasizes the importance of understanding and preserving natural social behavior. The USFS's failure to fully analyze this constitutes a legal and scientific oversight.

Requested Remedy:
Revise the EA and FONSI to include a comprehensive behavioral impact analysis specific to the Pryor herd, including expert consultation and field documentation of long-term band structure, dispersal, and matrilineal lines.

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Objection #5: AML Decisions Ignore Genetic and Habitat Fragmentation

The Pryor herd is functionally split between the Dryhead and Sykes Ridge areas, with limited natural interbreeding due to geography. Yet the proposed AML (as low as 108 horses) is not adjusted to account for this effective separation. This artificially low AML threatens genetic viability and ignores the recommendations of leading equine geneticists (see TCF 2022 and 2023 comments citing Dr. Gus Cothran). The proposal to introduce outside horses as a way to maintain genetic viability further undermines the long-term integrity of the Pryor herd, whose unique genetic and historical lineage should be preserved, not diluted.

Additional Supporting Information -

FOIA-obtained data released in 2023 further demonstrates that the AML proposed in the Environmental Assessment is not supported by verifiable forage calculations. The omission of high-elevation seasonal habitat and lack of transparent AUM-based formulas calls into question the validity of the carrying capacity assumptions underlying the AML. These deficiencies amplify concerns about maintaining a genetically viable population under current management thresholds. Notably, the Environmental Assessment does not cite a current genetic viability report for the Pryor herd. This is a critical omission, as genetic health is one of the central considerations in determining Appropriate Management Level (AML) and long-term herd sustainability.

Further Analysis Based on FOIA-Released Records -

The AML recalculation method presented in Appendix C of the EA depends heavily on data and findings from Appendix B, the rangeland health assessments (RHA). However, analysis of FOIA-released data reveals multiple inconsistencies and gaps in those assessments. Critically, no forage production data exists to support the AML formula used. In addition, the agency altered the "allowable utilization" rate from 45% to 40%-a change that lacks scientific justification, was unsupported by any weighted-use calculations across all forage users, and was not grounded in applicable research or site-specific analysis. These deviations undermine the transparency, repeatability, and reliability of the AML calculation process.

An independent analysis of the EA and FOIA-obtained data, titled "PMWHR - Environmental Assessment 2023: Analysis of Rangeland Health Assessment Methodologies and AML Recalculations" (see Attachment 5), is submitted here as supporting material. While this document is not authored by The Cloud Foundation, it reflects new information not available during the comment period and provides a detailed, data-based critique of AML

calculation methods and underlying rangeland health assessments. We include it for reference as it reinforces and further documents the issues raised in this objection.

The EA also contradicts itself in its treatment of Alternative 3, which proposes using known lineage and genetic information to guide management decisions. While the EA claims this approach is infeasible due to limitations in available data, it simultaneously acknowledges the Pryor herd's exceptional documentation and recordkeeping. This inconsistency further undermines the dismissal of more targeted and scientifically grounded alternatives, particularly when such alternatives could be implemented with public partner support.

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Conclusion

The Cloud Foundation objects to the U.S. Forest Service's decision on Project #67845 due to its reliance on flawed science, failure to consider humane alternatives, and disregard for the legal and ecological uniqueness of the Pryor Mountain wild horse herd. These concerns are further substantiated by newly obtained FOIA data and independent analyses, which highlight systemic deficiencies in the Environmental Assessment and decision-making process.

We urge the agency to withdraw or revise this decision in favor of transparent, science-based, and minimally invasive management strategies.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this objection.

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Attachments - New Information Only

*Attachment 1: PMWHR AIM Indicators Dataset (2012-2022)
*Attachment 2: IIRH 2021 Data - Pryor Mountain Range
*Attachment 3: PMWHR Data Request Compilation (2023 FOIA Response)
*Attachment 4: PMWHR AIM Dataset (2012-2021 FOIA Release)
*Attachment 5: Independent analysis of AML Method 2 and RHA inconsistencies (2024, based on FOIA-obtained data)

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