Data Submitted (UTC 11): 3/13/2020 7:00:00 AM
First name: Dennis
Last name: Schlueter
Organization:
Title:
Comments: Dear Mr. Best:

The purpose of this letter to to comment and mostly object to your Draft Proposed Action for the Heber Wild Horse Territory Management Plan (the Plan).

The title of the plan is correct; the subject horses are wild as defined in The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (the Act) and are protected under the Act. The plan does not qualify as protection, it is a beginning step to the elimination of this protected herd. Your argument that the horses are ferrel is no longer relevant in light of their definition and protection under the Act. The history of the horses in this area while interesting, is antidotal and not relevant to the current situation.

The current treatment of these protected horses and the Plan show a negative bias toward the horses by those who are responsible for their protection. There seems to be a strong bias and desire to protect the domestic livestock use of these public lands to the detriment of the wild animals. The Plan to have one person in charge and responsible for all decision about this herd is not acceptable. The decision should be made by a small group, odd in number, that represent the interests of all parties. This same group should be responsible of oversight of all activities related to herd management to see that policy and procedures are followed.

I hike, mountain bike and drive the entire forest a lot. I frequently see various bands of horses. Having spent much time in the forest I cannot agree or believe your estimate of the number of existing free roaming horses. The broad spread your estimates indicate more of a guess in the numbers of horses than an actual estimate based on sightings. Your proposed reduction of the herd size by 150-200 will likely eliminate most horses and maybe leave one or two bands. Leaving maybe 15-20 horses in two bands will not produce healthy foals and lead to herd termination. The existing herd size should not be reduced. On the other had, the plan should include a gradual reduction and elimination of the land use by domestic cattle.

Should you insist on a herd size reduction it should be slow, over a lengthy period of time so the adoption process in not flooded with horses. A slow process will help reduce the opportunity for meat buyers to buy a large number of horses for slaughter. The oversight of the reduction activity should be done by a small group representing the interest of all concerned parties. This groups should be of an odd number and also be in charge and responsible for all decisions regarding the herd. The Plan's idea of one person making all decisions regarding the herd is not acceptable.

I also object to the proposed limit to the area the herd may occupy. This proposed, small area along with small herd size will further lead to unhealthy foals, genetic deterioration and ultimately the end of the herd. The area allowed for the herd should not be the entire Apache-Sitgreaves Forest. The proposed small area suggest the horses will no longer be free roaming. This is a clear violation to the Act. As you state in the plan, the herd must be able to migrate. The Plan will not allow the horses to do this.

My suggestion for all of this is simple. Remove the cows and the fences. Reintroduce wolves and let the cougars be cougars. Allow nature to manage the wild animals in the forest. The will of business and the ranchers should not trump the will of the public. I have never met a person who came to the forest to see cows. We come to see wildlife. A free roaming herd is an attraction for Rim Country. The broad use of our public forest for cattle is offensive. There is way too much cow poop on the trails. The cattle also seem to not mind defecating and urinating in the water they drink from the stock tanks.

I believe the Forest Service should embrace the preservation and growth of the herd as a tourist attraction and an icon of the west.