

# White River Field Office

## Wild Horse Program Analysis & Operational Plan

### July 27, 1999

This program analysis and operational plan describes the current status of the White River Field Office's wild horse program.

### Public Awareness

The long term management of wild horses in the Meeker Field Office is a major public concern. Proposals to remove horses from the range can draw spirited opposition. The Field Office's plan to phase out horses in the West Douglas Herd Area is most controversial.

This Wild Horse Program Analysis & Operational Plan was first completed in August of 1997 and has been revised periodically. Since the fall of 1997 presentations regarding the White River Wild Horse program have been given to the BLM Colorado State Director, Craig District Grazing Advisory Board, Northwest Colorado Resource Advisory Council, Congressmen Scott McInnis, Friends of the Mustangs, Colorado Wild Horse and Burro Coalition, Northwest Colorado Wild Horse Association, Rangely Times, Rocky Mountain News, Meeker Herald, The BLM's National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board, and the Colorado Horseman's Council. A public hearing was held in Meeker.

### Land Use Planning Decisions

Public interest in the White River Field Offices' wild horse program appears to be primarily focused on land use planning decisions. The following discussion provides a history of all key land use planning decisions since passage of the Wild - Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971. The White River Resource Area contains three regions where wild horses are a management consideration. The attached map identifies all the geographic locations identified in this document.

Permanent horse use is planned in the 190,000 acre Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area. Horses will be phased out in the North Piceance and West Douglas Herd Areas.

### Land Use Planning History

The first wild horse census was completed in 1974. Since the Wild - Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 specifies that wild horses "... are to be considered in the area where presently found as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands," this data ultimately provides the basis for management of wild horses.

Location	Number Horses Observed - 1974
Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area	139
West Douglas Herd Area	9
North Piceance Herd Area	2
Outside all currently identified Herd and Herd Management Areas	2
Total	152

Formal interpretation (with public input) of habitat associated with the 1974 wild horse distribution began almost immediately following the census. The Cathedral Bluffs is a prominent ridge that separates the Piceance and Douglas Creek Basins in the White River Field Office. Horse habitat was evaluated in the Piceance and Douglas Creek Units." Ultimately the Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management Area was selected to incorporate the prime habitat from both "units." The Resource Area began using the term Herd Area" around 1979 to report the number and location of horses observed outside the Herd Management Area. Wild horses have substantially increased their numbers and area occupied since 1974.

The following is a synopsis of the key White River Field Office planning decisions:

1975 Management Framework Plan - 1) Remove wild horses west of Douglas Creek, 2) Retain Wild Horses East of Douglas Creek, 3) Construct a fence along the Douglas Creek road from Rangely up East Douglas Creek.

1980 Environmental Impact Statement on Grazing Management - Analyzed grazing issues prior to the 1981 Management Framework Plan decisions.

1981 Management Framework Plan - 1) Allocate 2,101 AUMs of forage for a range of 95- 140 wild horses in the 148,153 acre Piceance - East Douglas area, 2) Remove all horses west of Douglas Creek, 3) Remove horses from all other allotments within the Piceance Planning Unit, 4) Complete boundary fencing of Yellow Creek and Cathedral Bluffs (allotments) to eliminate drift of wild horses into adjacent allotments.

1981 Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area Plan - Reiterated the 1980 Management Framework Plan and 1981 Grazing Environmental Impact Statement decisions and again called for removal of all horses west of Douglas Creek and in allotments outside the Herd Management Area.

1985 Piceance Basin Resource Management Plan - Wild horse management would continue according to decisions approved in the Piceance -East Douglas Herd Management Area Plan. The plan designates the areas on which horses will be managed and states how the maintenance of a viable herd will be achieved.

1997 Resource Management Plan Record of Decision - Manage for a healthy, viable breeding population of 95-140 wild horses on 190,130 acres (added Greasewood allotment from North, Piceance HA to the Piceance - East Douglas HMA) so that a thriving ecological balance is maintained for all plant and animal species on that range. Continue monitoring studies and adjust the long term AML based on the results of that monitoring. In the long term, remove all horses from West Douglas and the remainder of North Piceance Herd Areas.

## **The Piceance East Douglas Herd Management Area**

**Geography** - The 190,000 acre Herd Management Area contains prime yearlong wild Horse Habitat, featuring six regions; Rocky Ridge, Greasewood, Barcus/Pinto, Box Elder, Pasture C/Square S Allotment, and East Douglas. Elevations range from 6000 to 8000 feet.

**Climate and Vegetation** - Average precipitation in the Piceance Basin is around 16 inches per year. Much of the annual precipitation occurs outside the critical growing season of May and June. Deep-rooted shrub communities able to use dormant season moisture are predominant. The HMA is primarily Pinyon Juniper ridges and sagebrush bottoms. The highest elevation acreage (about 10% of the HMA) is mountain shrub; pockets of forest are found on the north slopes of the Cathedral bluffs. Houndstongue and Cheatgrass are key

weed concerns.

**Range Projects** - Eleven range improvement projects have been completed in the Herd Management Area since 1985. These improvements include water and forage enhancements. All funding for these improvements has come from livestock grazing receipts.

**Census data**

Year	1974	1980	1985	1991	1995	1997	1999
# Horses Observed in the HMA	139	225	93	272	366	286	242

**Wildlife**

The White River Field Office contains habitat for a wide variety of watchable wildlife and big game. Mule deer and sagegrouse present the largest issues relating to management of wild horses.

**Livestock**

All livestock use in the Herd Management Area is cattle. The following table shows grazing allotment information.

Allotment	Herd Management Area Region	Permittees	Active Preference & Private (AUMS)	Recent Actual Use (AUMs)
Greasewood	Greasewood	Oscar Wyatt	1703	900
Yellow Creek	Rocky Ridge, Barcus/Pinto, Box Elder	Burke Brothers	3892	2100
Square S	Square S - Pasture C	Mantle Ranches, Colorado DOW	*Portion of Allotment	750 0
Cathedral Bluffs	East Douglas	Razorback Ranch LLC	*Portion of Allotment	1750

**Wild Horse Appropriate Management Level:**

The appropriate management level (AML) for the Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area (HMA) is 165 animals. The current AML constitutes an increase from the 95 to 140 head specified in the land use plan. However the land use plan specifies that the AML will be revised in this manner based on monitoring data. This figure is derived from the following sources:

- 1. Box Elder, Barcus/Pinto, Square S - Pasture C, and Rocky Ridge - 115 Animals.** This estimate is based on an analysis of climate, actual use, and utilization data linked to an acceptable situation in the 1987 trend data. Trend studies read in 1995 show a sharp decline in key forage plants. Data analysis is documented in the removal plan/environmental assessment prepared to evaluate gathering wild horses in the Herd Management Area in 1996.
- 2. East Douglas - 30 Animals.** This is a long standing forage allocation of 450 AUMs at 1.25 AUMS/per head. This region appears to be self regulating. Horses move out of the area at densities greater than this, and we seldom conduct gather operations in the area.

3. **Greasewood - 20 Animals.** This figure is an estimate. Ecological Site Inventory field work is complete, analysis is being held up by livestock grazing permit renewal workload.

**Appropriate Management Level Range** - Assuming the population continues to expand at about 20% per year, the AML of 165 would be managed in a range between 135 and 235 head, where 165 adults is the average population over a three year term. The long term management sequence would entail removing about 100 head every three years as follows:

Year in the Sequence	# of Horses	Discussion
0	135	Low range following a removal
1	165	Long term mid range - The Appropriate Management Level
2	195	High end maximum of grazing adult horses; the field office would evaluate range monitoring data conduct population census to verify that a gather operation the following year is warranted. Current information will be evaluated in accordance with The Wild Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act to assure that an overpopulation exists and that the purpose of the removal operation is to restore or maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on the range.
3	235	High end maximum number of adult horses + one foal crop. Foals don't consume substantive amounts of forage until well after the critical growing season.

### Population Viability

Long term maintenance of a viable, healthy wild horse herd is a common goal for both the BLM and the public. The White River Field Office conducts an analysis of herd ages and sex ratios whenever horses are handled in a gather operation.

The Chart labeled White River Field Office - Wild Horse Viability Analysis takes current age and sex data about the White River Herd and uses foaling/mortality rates documented in the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, to project future age ratios. The chart assumes that in October 1999, the gather operation will remove animals less than 10 Years old; the next gather operation scheduled around 2002 would remove animals less than six years old.

This analysis serves as a worst case scenario to assure selective gather techniques that remove only younger animals do not result in an older herd that falls into an irreversible decline. The analysis indicates that the Piceance - East Douglas Herd will remain viable through all projected operations.

### Summary

The Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area designated by the White River Field Office through the land use planning process adheres to both the letter and the spirit of the Wild Free Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act, with regard to;

**Genetics** - Since all the horses in the Field office came from a single herd it is probable that the Piceance-East Douglas Herd Management area retains the entire gene pool present at the passage of the act.

**Numbers & Viability** - The 165 head appropriate management level is 8.5% greater than the 1974 population, and 65% greater than the number of animals estimated to have been present at the passage of the act. The herd will remain viable given any foreseeable gather operations.

**Habitat** - The 190,000 acre Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area contains the key habitat being used by horses at the passage of the act. All but 13 of the 152 horses present in 1974 were located in areas now included in the Herd Management Area.

**Rational for not adding the North Piceance Herd Area to the Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area**

The prime wild horse habitat on public land in the North Piceance Herd Area was incorporated into the Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area when the Greasewood Allotment was transferred to the HMA. Now that the Greasewood Allotment is part of the HMA, the North Piceance Herd Area can be described as marginal habitat crosscut by numerous fences, where isolated bands of horses are largely dependent on private water. The specific tracts being referenced are the private parcels located along the upper west slope of Calamity Ridge. The acreage associated with these private tracts forms the majority of the habitat preferred by wild horses in what is left of the North Piceance Herd Area. Potential for development of water on the BLM is limited, and expensive.

Immediately north of these private lands and to a lesser extent on these private lands is a threatened plant called the Piceance Twin Pod. Protection of this rare plant is the primary purpose of the Yanks Gulch - Area of Critical Environmental Concern. This plant does not constitute preferred forage for horses. However its habitat is immediately adjacent to the regions' best water sources, and excessive trampling occurs when horses occupy the area in large numbers.

**Rational for not adding the West Douglas to the Piceance - East Douglas Herd Management Area**

The Texas Mountain Area within the West Douglas Herd Area contains rugged terrain and Pinyon-Juniper cover that makes gather operations expensive and dangerous. This landscape hinders, and sometimes precludes, gathering horses with standard techniques. In many areas, horses hold in pockets of heavy trees in steep terrain rather than flee a helicopter. Gather operations are correspondingly unsuccessful on Texas Mountain in comparison with the rest of the herd area. It is also probable that intense energy exploration and development occurring in the northern part of the herd area encourages use in the rough terrain to the south. Horse use began shifting towards the rough terrain associated with Texas Mountain in the early 1980's. In the February 1997 census, 38 of the 95 horses observed in the West Douglas Herd Area occurred in that 25% of the Herd Area that features this rough terrain. Areas in the Missouri Creek and Evacuation Creek Drainages, south of the Herd Area Boundary, now appear to be preferred habitat.

This distribution problem leads directly to overgrazing. Problems associated with the upland soil, and the plant and animal communities standards of rangeland health are readily apparent. In the area northwest of Texas Mountain these rangeland health problems are clearly attributable to wild horses. In 1996 the BLM produced a report evaluating the trend, utilization, climate and livestock actual use studies that documented this deteriorating situation.

The West Douglas Herd Area is now isolated from the Herd Management area by the fences on both sides of Highway 139. The isolated herd currently occupying the area shows signs of inbreeding. Managing horses in this herd area would require building a second herd not present in 1971, with genetic material from somewhere else.

## Current Program Status

The table called White River Field Office - Wild Horse Operational Plan describes past and future operations between 1997 and 2004. The following facts or projections can be derived from the table.

- Since October 1997, the White River Field Office has gathered 329 animals, but reduced the wild horse population by only 129.
- There are currently about 431 horses on the range in the White River Field Office. About 290 of these animals are in the Herd Management Area.
- In October 1999 the White River Field Office plans a gather operation that will phase out horses from the North Piceance Herd Area, and reduce the HMA population to 190 animals.
- In August 2000 the White River Field Office plans a gather operation that will phase out horses from the West Douglas Herd Area.
- The Field Office hopes to reach the low end of the AML range and begin an extended period of program stability in the year 2001.

# WILD HORSE AREAS

