Healthy Rangelands, Healthy Wild Horses and Burros

Healthy rangelands are the foundation for healthy wild horse and burro populations. Providing a variety of habitats for resident animals, the available grasses, forbs and shrubs provide a nutritious diet which can carry the animals through all but the most extreme drought or winter conditions.

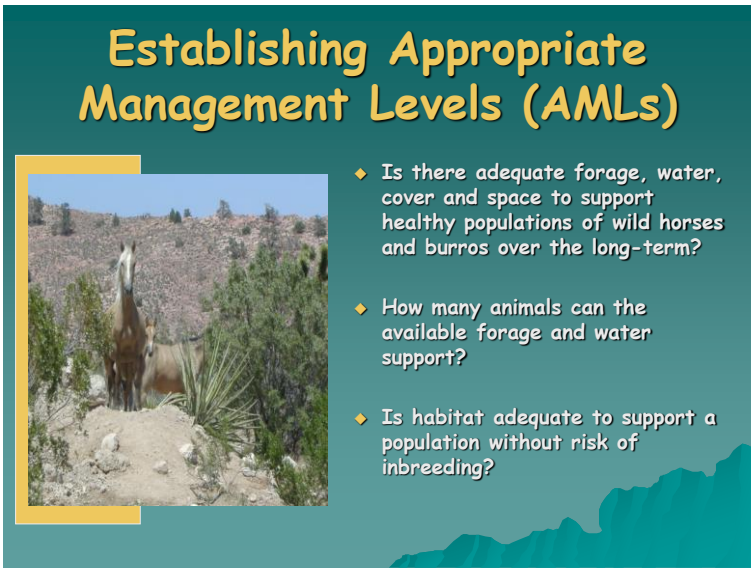
Without proper management, the range can be damaged. Desirable vegetation species can be replaced by species less palatable or productive than the native vegetation. Invasive plants such as cheat grass or red brome, or noxious weeds such as knapweed or perennial pepperweed often out-compete native species, further reducing vegetation diversity. Under these conditions, the range can become unable to produce the diversity of forage and habitat needed to safeguard the health and assure the long-term sustainability of the many animals that live there.

To assure proper management of western rangelands, the BLM allocates the forage provided by the habitats found here for use by wild horses and burros, wildlife, and domestic livestock. Controlling the use by all grazing animals helps to ensure vegetation is not overgrazed and reduces the risk of invasion by weed species.

Healthy rangelands provide a diverse mix of grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

Appropriate Management Level

The number of wild horses or burros which can graze within a Herd Management Area (HMA) without causing damage to the range is called the **Appropriate Management Level** (AML). In establishing the AML, the BLM relies on an intensive monitoring program over several years. These studies consider grazing utilization, trend in range ecologic condition, actual use, climate (weather) data and other factors. AML is established in consideration of the sustainable forage and water available for use by wildlife, permitted livestock, and wild horses and burros in the HMA. The BLM sets AML with public involvement through in-depth environmental analyses and decision processes.



Achieving a Thriving Natural Ecological Balance

The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (WFRHBA) requires BLM to maintain wild horse and burro numbers at levels that achieve a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship in the area. When populations of wild horses and burros (or livestock or wildlife) exceed the range's ability to support them, the health of the land begins to deteriorate. Native vegetation is damaged, encouraging the growth of invasive weeds or less desirable plants. This, in turn, reduces the amount of forage available for use.

The BLM controls livestock grazing use through the terms and conditions outlined in each grazing permit. The number and type of livestock, the authorized season of use and the grazing strategy, as well as the responsibility for maintenance of any existing range improvements is specified. By contrast, wildlife population size is generally controlled through hunting or natural population controls.

When natural population controls such as disease or predation or application of fertility control is not sufficient to maintain wild horse or burro population size within the AML, the size of the wild horse or burro population must be reduced to protect the health of the land and the animals.

Before proposing a gather to remove excess wild horses or burros, the BLM examines monitoring data such as grazing utilization and distribution; trend in range ecological condition; actual use; climate (weather) data; current population inventory; the number and distribution of wild horses or burros residing in areas not designated for their long-term use; and other factors such as the results of land health assessments. When the authorized officer has determines that excess wild horses and burros are present, gathers to capture and remove the excess animals are completed.

The BLM examines monitoring data such as grazing utilization, trend in range ecological condition, aerial survey and other information to determine if excess wild horses and burros are present and need removal.