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DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION  
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR  
BUDGET AND PLANNING DIVISION

# Notice of Proposed Action and Opportunity to Comment

## Wild Horse and Burro Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs)

Austin and Tonopah Ranger Districts,  
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest  
Lander, Eureka and Nye Counties, Nevada

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## COMMENTS WELCOME

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The Austin and Tonopah Ranger Districts of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest welcomes your comments on the Wild Horse and Burro Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs) Project. The purpose of this project is to update or establish AMLs and set general management direction for the Wild Horse and Burro territories (WHTs) on the Monitor, Hot Creek, and Toquima Mountain Ranges. We would like your thoughts on the scope of issues to be addressed in the environmental analysis (EA) and your comments on the proposed action.

### **Location/Setting**

The Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts are located in central Nevada with the northern end approximately 25 miles west of Eureka, Nevada and the southern end approximately 15 miles east of Tonopah, Nevada (Map 1). The project area includes all WHTs on the Monitor, Hot Creek, and Toquima mountain ranges. The Monitor, Hot Creek, and Toquima mountain ranges are located in central Nevada with the northern end approximately 25 miles west of Eureka, Nevada and the southern end approximately 15 miles east of Tonopah, Nevada. Elevations range from 6,000 feet to 11,000 feet. Climate is represented by hot, dry summers and cold winters with temperatures ranging from below zero in the winter to 90+ F in the summer. Average annual precipitation is 5-12 inches. Periods of drought are frequent. According to the Nevada Natural Resources Status Report dated August 2002, periods of drought are frequent in Nevada, and Nevada's river systems experience more "below average water years" than "above average water years." The Report documents five serious drought periods during the Twentieth Century: 1928-37, 1953-55, 1959-62, 1976-77, and 1987-94. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) also reports drought in Nevada from 1999-2009.

### **Background**

The Wild Horses and Burros Protection Act of 1971, as amended, and Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 establishes wild-free roaming horses and burros as part of the natural system where they occur on National Forest System lands and requires management, protection, and control of wild horses. 43 CFR 4700 sets the regulations to implement the laws relating to the protection, management and control of wild horses and burros under the administration of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM is responsible for protection, management and control of wild horses and burros on the public lands (BLM Handbook 4710). The BLM Handbook 4710 describes the authorities, objectives, policies and procedures that guide the management and control of wild free-roaming horses and burros on the public lands and on other lands that are adjacent to or intermingled with public lands and that serve as habitat for wild horses and burros. Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2261.1 and Memorandum of Understanding on Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros (FSM 1531.11a) require coordination of all management activities for wild free-roaming horse and burro populations (wild horses) with the BLM to reflect similar management objectives. The Forest Service objective is "to maintain wild free-roaming horse and burro populations in a thriving ecological balance in the areas they inhabit on National Forests" (FSM 2260.2).

Forest Service policy directs (FSM 2261.1) states that "when wild free-roaming horses and burros roam part of the year on National Forest lands and part of the year on lands administered by BLM, the

authorized officers of the two agencies should develop and approve a single territory plan. The plan should include agreement on inventory, desired populations level, determination of excess animals planning management, protection, control, capture methods, and responsibility for initiating action. The plan may designate a lead agency for management actions.”

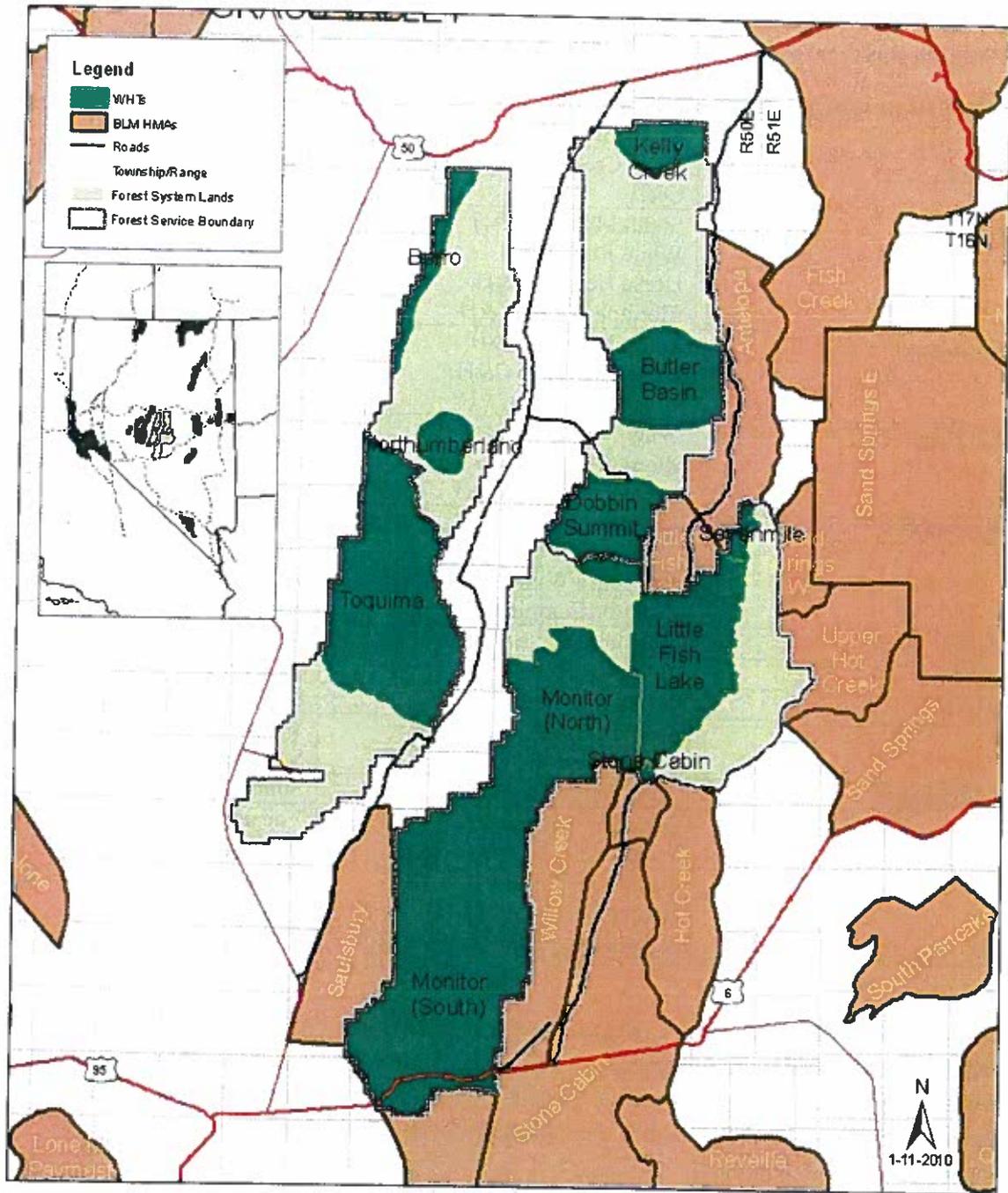
AML is expressed as a range with a low and high number (BLM Handbook 4710). The lower limit is the minimum viable population of wild horses. The upper limit will maintain sustainability of the habitat in terms of forage, water, and open space and reflect a slight upward trend in range improvement.

Because wild horses move between BLM and National Forest System lands without consideration to boundaries, this project proposes to establish an Appropriate Management Level Range (AML range) for the Forest Service (FS) WHTs that are consistent with established BLM AMLs in order to manage the BLM Herd Management Areas (HMAs) and FS WHTs as portions of a larger biological unit or single territory. An example is an AML range of 60-100, where the AML range is applicable to all portions of the single territory at any given time. Management of the FS WHT without consideration of the BLM HMAs would not address the natural movement of wild horses throughout the year and with changing environmental conditions. Therefore it is necessary to manage the WHT and HMA as one biological unit to allow for the year round needs of the wild horses to be met, and so as to not impede the natural movement of wild horses between the HMAs and WHTs. Coordinating AMLs would be the foundation for future management within the WHT/HMA and achievement of a thriving natural ecological balance to sustain a healthy self-sustaining wild horse population.

The wild horse and burro territories, Kelly Creek, Butler Basin, Dobbin Summit, Sevenmile, Little Fish Lake, Monitor North, Stone Cabin, and Monitor South are located within the Monitor and Hot Creek Mountain Ranges. Hickison Burro, Northumberland, and Toquima are located within the Toquima Mountain Range, all within central Nevada (Map 1). These WHTs are managed by the Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Under existing conditions only three of the eleven territories have established AMLs or AML ranges. Territory management plans are outdated or nonexistent for joint FS/BLM management and monitoring of the wild horse resource.

The Monitor WHT was divided into two management areas now referred to as Monitor (north) and Monitor (south). The boundary between Monitor (north) and Monitor (south) is McCann Canyon. All wild horses north of McCann Canyon will be considered Monitor (north) and the wild horses south of McCann Canyon will be considered Monitor (south). Field inspections document that Monitor (north) wild horses interact with the Little Fish Lake and WHT whereas Monitor (south) wild horses interact with the Saulsbury Herd Management Area (HMA). The horses residing in the Monitor (north) area were considered when the original AML was established for the Little Fish Lake Valley through Coordinated Resource Management Planning in 1983. These horses traveled back and forth from Clover Creek, Burnt Cabin Spring, and Indian Garden Spring to Little Fish Lake Valley regularly. Over the course of time and personnel changes, the AML established in 1983 was mistakenly interpreted to only include horses on Little Fish Lake Herd Management Area (HMA) and WHT.

Map 1: Project Area Map



Map 1. The Monitor/Hot Creek & Toquima Wild Horse Territories and BLM Herd Management Areas



1:770,900



Map data was compiled from multiple sources. The Hemlock-Typha National Forest makes no warranty as to the correctness or accuracy of this data.

Within the eleven WHTs there are twenty-one cattle allotments administered by the Forest Service (14 active and 7 vacant, Table 1). The current permitted season of use authorizes both winter and summer grazing within the Butler Basin and Monitor WHTs and summer grazing in Little Fish Lake, Stone Cabin and Sevenmile WHTs. Currently, the only WHT not authorized for any livestock grazing is Kelly Creek.

**Table 1: Current Livestock Management**

| Territory      | Allotment(s)   | Current Season of use                          |
|----------------|--|--|
| Kelly Creek    | Kelly Creek /North Monitor C&H   | Vacant   |
| Butler Basin   | South Monitor C&H<br>White Rock C&H<br>Horse Heaven C&H<br>Monitor Winter C&H                                      | Vacant<br>Vacant<br>Summer<br>Winter           |
| Dobbin Summit  | South Monitor C&H<br>Little Fish Lake C&H<br>Wagon Johnnie C&H   | Vacant<br>Summer<br>Summer                     |
| Monitor North  | Wagon Johnnie C&H<br>Monitor Complex C&H<br>Little Fish Lake C&H   | Summer<br>Summer<br>Summer                     |
| Monitor South  | McKinney C&H<br>Stone Cabin C&H<br>Saulsbury Winter C&H<br>Monitor Complex C&H                                     | Vacant<br>Summer<br>Winter<br>Summer           |
| Little Fish    | Wagon Johnnie C&H  | Summer   |
| Stone Cabin    | Wagon Johnnie C&H  | Summer   |
| Sevenmile      | Sevenmile Wash   | Summer managed by BLM                          |
| Burro          | Hot Springs Winter C&H<br>Stoneberger C&H  | Winter<br>Summer                               |
| Northumberland | Northumberland C&H   | Summer   |
| Toquima        | Meadow Canyon C&H<br>Monitor Valley West C&H<br>Mount Jefferson<br>Round Mountain C&H<br>Round Mountain Winter C&H | Vacant<br>Vacant<br>Vacant<br>Vacant<br>Winter |

Wild horses within the Monitor/Hot Creek and Toquima Wild Horse Territories (WHTs) utilize Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered Herd Management Areas (HMAs). Seasonal movement patterns of the wild horses are primarily dependent on availability of forage. In general, the Forest Service WHTs have limited suitable winter habitat while the BLM HMAs have limited suitable summer habitat. Consequently, when setting the WHT AMLs the Forest Service considered the amount of winter habitat on Forest System Lands. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest adapted the 'Wild Horse and Burro Habitat Evaluation Procedures User Guide' (Bureau of Land Management 1986) to produce a Geographic Information System (GIS) model for determining appropriate herd size of wild horses based on habitat quality. This computer model is designed to calculate the total area suitable for grazing. However, since the WHT on Forest Service administered lands have limited suitable winter habitat the model was also modified to calculate the wild horse capacity based on suitable winter habitat (Table 2). Wild horse censuses were conducted for each WHT. Examining census data indicates that wild horses are able to

graze up to 7500 feet in elevation during the winter months, therefore winter habitat was defined as the part of the wild horse territory below 7500 feet in elevation. Census data was also used as a tool to determine if the AML developed was reasonable. Initial AMLs were further adjusted after coordination with adjacent BLM HMAs as directed by Forest Service policy contained in Forest Service Manual (FSM) 2261.1 and Memorandum of Understanding on Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros (FSM 1531.11a) require coordination of all management activities for wild free-roaming horse and burro populations (wild horses) with the BLM to reflect similar management objectives.

**Table 2: Winter Habitat**

| Wild Horse Territory              | Total Area (Acres) | Capable Acres Equal to or below 7,500ft |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Kelly Creek                       | 20,902             | 9,941                                   |
| Butler Basin                      | 53,523             | 8,707                                   |
| Dobbin Summit                     | 48,711             | 9,999                                   |
| Monitor<br>1)North<br><br>2)South | 339,428            | 20,8151<br><br>43,589<br><br>165,562    |
| Little Fish Lake                  | 88,235             | 65,384                                  |
| Stone Cabin                       | 1,460              | 1,461                                   |
| Sevenmile                         | 5,710              | 2,481                                   |
| Burro                             | 16,579             | 16,566                                  |
| Toquima                           | 144,599            | 39,213                                  |
| Northumberland                    | 13,025             | 60                                      |

**Purpose and need for action**

The purpose of this initiative is to establish Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs) and set general management direction for the Wild Horse and Burro territories (WHTs) on the Monitor, Hot Creek, and Toquima Ranges.

This action is needed, because under existing conditions only three of the eleven territories have established AMLs' or AML ranges and are in need of re-evaluation. Territory management plans for joint FS/BLM management and monitoring of the wild horse resource are outdated or nonexistent.

Without AMLs established on nine of the eleven territories, these populations will continue to increase without any means for control. Without population control, a thriving natural ecological balance cannot be achieved, as mandated by the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. A thriving natural ecological balance exists when the cumulative effect of approved multiple uses in a Territory do not cause unacceptable impacts or deterioration of the rangeland resources and maintains healthy animals. As evidence of this lack of balance, there are a number of sites which are not meeting current Forest Plan standards for ecological condition due to overgrazing, and overgrazing is causing adverse effects on watershed conditions in certain areas.

Under desired conditions, a Territory Management Plan for wild horse territories on the Monitor, Hot Creek, and Toquima Ranges would be in place and implemented. The wild horses would be managed within appropriate management levels through coordination with adjacent BLM HMAs' (FSM 2261.1, BLM Handbook 4710, and FSM 1531.11a). Resource conditions would meet Forest Plan standards. A thriving natural ecological balance would be achieved. This action would move existing conditions toward desired conditions. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Toiyabe N.F. Forest Plan, and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan.

This area has very high archaeological site density. Less than 1% of the area has been inventoried for archaeological sites, but it is clear that there is a high density for prehistoric archaeological sites and a good representation of historic sites. Archaeological sites recorded in the Project Area in 2005 and 2006 field season frequently note the impacts of horses on the site integrity. Horses and early peoples gravitate to the same places due to factors like water, shade, vegetation type and low slopes, so the overlap between sites and horse use is quite notable.

Horse impacts to sites include heavy trampling and churning, de-vegetation, dung piles, and rubbing damage to historic structures and fences. When prints or manure are evident, it's clear when impacts are specifically equine damage, but many of the described impacts overlap with those done by cattle, native wildlife and other introduced wildlife. .

Horses have been living in Central Nevada for over two hundred years and their populations have shifted up and down in response to climate and human trapping for use for working animals, meat, or to eliminate them as grazing competition for other livestock.

## **Alternatives**

Two alternatives have been identified the no action, and the proposed action (preferred alternative).

### **Alternative 1 "No Action"**

This alternative does not take any action towards establishing or updating wild horse AMLs. Consequently, there will be no changes to management of horses on the Forest System Lands. Resources potentially affected by the no action alternative include wildlife (sensitive and non-sensitive), vegetation (sensitive and non-sensitive), range, cultural and water resources (Table 4). Wild horse numbers on WHTs without AMLs would only be influenced by natural causes or BLM management activities implemented on adjoining HMAs.

Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs)

The Forest Service would continue to manage wild horse populations on WHTs with current AMLs (as set in 2003 and 1983) at those current AML levels:

- Butler Basin WHT: AML 30-50; summer occupancy only by 60-100 wild horses
- Little Fish Lake WHT: “Minimal AML” 64; summer and winter occupancy by at least 16-28 wild horses
- Monitor [North] WHTs: “Minimal AML” 99; summer and winter occupancy by at least 11-20 wild horses

**Alternative 2 “Proposed Action”**

This initiative proposes to establish or revise the appropriate management levels (AMLs) (Table 3) of the wild horses and burros occupying these eleven WHTs within the project area, by establishing an AML range for the FS WHTs in order to manage the BLM HMAs and FS WHTs as portions of a larger biological unit or single territory, and to determine whether or not to prepare joint FS/BLM territory management plans, pursuant to the Wild Horses and Burros Protection Act, and consistent with Forest Service policy and direction (FSM 2260). This initiative does not propose new management methods or objectives, as these are encoded in BLM management directives (BLM Handbook 4710), and the Forest Service is required to coordinate all activities related to wild horses and burros with the BLM to reflect similar management objectives. This initiative also does not implement territory management plans. This proposal assures that Forest Service management of the WHTs are compatible with that of adjacent and adjoining BLM Herd Management Areas (HMAs) by determining if the two agencies should develop and approve a single territory management plan (FSM 2261.1). AMLs would be consistent with modeled carrying capacity, or at levels less-than-modeled to provide consistency with BLM HMAs and WHTs inhabited by interacting wild horses. Proposed Action includes adaptive management provisions to modify AMLs if warranted based upon the results of BLM monitoring of adjoining HMAs.

**Table 3: Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs)**

| WHT           | AML                 | Last Census/Animal Numbers       |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| Kelly Creek   | 8 -16               | 2008/13<br>2005/21<br>2004/49    |
| Butler Basin  | 60-100              | 2008/118<br>2005/269<br>2004/215 |
| Dobbin Summit | 1-3 Incidental use* | 2008/0<br>2005/6                 |
| Seven Mile    | 1-3 Incidental use* |                                  |

|   |                     |  |
|---|---------------------|--|
| Little Fish Lake                        | 80-139              | 2009/121<br>2008/157<br>2007/99<br>2006/85<br>2005/133<br>2002/170 |
| Monitor [North](north of McCann Canyon) | 11-20               | 2002/117   |
| Stone Cabin                             | 1-3 Incidental use* | 2005/5   |
| Monitor [South](south of McCann Canyon) | 40-70               | 2002/117   |
| Burro                                   | 16-45               | 2009/100<br>2008/56<br>2004/63                                     |
| Toquima                                 | 15-30               | 2009/139<br>2008/80<br>2002/47                                     |
| Northumberland                          | 3-8                 | 2009/8<br>2008/1   |

\*limited habitat capacity, allows for incidental use by wild horses

Within the project area on National Forest System Lands, there are eleven wild horse territories and based on analysis, the following are proposed appropriate management levels (AMLs, by territory):

1) Kelly Creek WHT: 8-16 wild horses on 20,902 acres. This herd interacts with BLM's North Monitor Herd Management Areas (HMA). Census flights, ground observations and modeled winter capacity indicate that this herd spends summers on Kelly Creek WHT and most of the herd winters on North Monitor HMA. In the future, if the BLM decides to readjust the AML on the North Monitor HMA the Forest Service will adjust the Kelly Creek WHT AML to reflect BLM changes and continue coordinated management objectives.

2) Butler Basin WHT: 60-100 wild horses on 53,523 acres. This herd spends summers on Butler Basin WHT and winters on BLM's Sevenmile HMA. In the future, if the BLM decides to readjust the AML on

the Sevenmile HMA the Forest Service will adjust the Butler Basin WHT AML to reflect BLM changes and continue coordinated management objectives.

3) Dobbin Summit WHT: 1-3 wild horses on 48,711 acres. Wild horses do not regularly occupy this territory. No horse sign was seen during the 2006 ground inspections. During a BLM flight in 2006 six horses were seen, however a Forest Service flight later in the year did not observe a single horse. No horses were seen during the 2004 summer census, and the population has been reported as 0 in 2002.

4) Monitor WHT: 51-90 wild horses on 339,428 acres.

- Monitor (north) WHT - 11-20 wild horses managed north of McCann Canyon. These horses interact with the Little Fish Lake and Stone Cabin WHT's and BLM's Little Fish Lake HMA. Computer analysis indicates that Monitor (north) is limited by winter habitat and has a surplus of summer habitat. The computer analysis also indicates that Monitor (north) has enough generally suitable winter habitat to support 11-20 wild horses. Setting the AML based on winter habitat will reduce the probability of over-stocking the Little Fish Lake HMA and Little Fish Lake WHT during the winter months.
- Monitor (south) WHT - 40-70 wild horses managed south of McCann Canyon. These horses interact with BLM's Saulsbury Herd Management Area (HMA). Computer analysis indicates that Monitor (south) WHT has slightly less winter habitat than summer habitat. Since winter habitat is limited, the AML for this portion of the Monitor WHT was also set based on generally suitable winter habitat. Setting the AML based on winter habitat will reduce the probability of over-stocking the Saulsbury HMA during the winter and summer months. Includes, adaptive AML 33-57 proposed to address BLM's concern that a winter AML of 70 would have a negative effect on Saulsbury HMA horse health and vegetation condition. Implementation trigger: should BLM's winter census (flight or ground observation) document more than 10 horses in the Saulsbury HMA north of Highway 6 within four years of a gather, the Forest Service would reduce the Monitor [South] WHT AML to 35-57 (Battle Mountain Field Office recommended AML).

5) Little Fish Lake WHT: 80-139 wild horses on 88,235 acres. These horses interact with BLM's Little Fish Lake HMA and Monitor (north) WHT. Computer analysis indicates the Little Fish Lake wild horse territory (WHT) is limited by winter habitat. Setting the appropriate management levels (AMLs) based on winter habitat will reduce the probability of stocking the Little Fish Lake herd management area (HMA) and Monitor (north) WHT over the AML during the winter months.

6) Stone Cabin WHT: 1-3 wild horses on 1,460 acres. These horses are part of BLM's Stone Cabin HMA herd, and this AML allows for incidental use on the National Forest System lands. This WHT has insufficient summer and winter habitat to support a resident herd.

7) Sevenmile WHT: 1-3 wild horses on 5,710 acres. These horses are part of BLM's Sevenmile HMA herd, and this AML allows for incidental use on the National Forest System lands. This WHT has insufficient summer and winter habitat to support a resident herd.

8) Burro WHT: 16-45 wild horses/burros on 16,579 acres. These horses/burros are part of the Hickison HMA herd. In the future, if the BLM decides to readjust the AML on the Hickison HMA the Forest

Service will adjust the Burro WHT AML to reflect BLM changes and continue coordinated management objectives.

9) Northumberland WHT: 3-8 wild horses on 13,025 acres.

10) Toquima WHT: 15-30 wild horses on 144,599 acres.

General management direction will reference and adhere to standard BLM methods, direction, and protocols (BLM Handbook 4710); this direction includes the following wild horse management areas:

- Age Structure
- Animal Condition
- Distribution
- Euthanasia
- Genetic Diversity
- Phenotype
- Population Control
- Recruitment Rate
- Sex Ratio

#### **Mitigation Measures**

Mitigation measures will be implemented to avoid and minimize negative effects to resources surrounding and within the project area. Specific measures identified to date are:

#### **Trap/Pen Locations**

Traps and shipping pens will only be located in areas surveyed and cleared for cultural and sensitive resources. Preferred location will be on previously disturbed sites such as roads.

#### **Noxious Weeds**

During the wild horse gather, the contractor will be required to abide by the Forest Service certified weed free order. This states that any feed used on the Forest System Lands has to be certified weed free. Additionally, any livestock (needing supplemental feed) used on Forest System Lands have to be fed certified weed free feed at least three days prior to project implementation.

#### **Rare Plants**

The following sensitive plants are known to occur in the analysis area: Eastwood milkvetch, scorpion milkvetch, Toquima milkvetch, Toiyabe buckwheat, Nachlinger catchfly, alpine goldenweed, and arid draba.

#### **Public Safety**

During the gather public access will be limited along roads near the corral sites and within areas where horses are actively being gathered. In areas near gather locations signs will be posted along roadsides.

Additionally, public notices will be posted in Eureka, Austin, and Tonopah to inform the public the gather dates and areas where access will be restricted.

**Scoping**

Initial scoping invited public input regarding the proposed action was invited through the mailing of a scoping letter on May 4th, 2006 to interested parties and any comments were to be received no later than June 4th, 2006. In addition to involving the public, an internal and inter-agency scoping process was performed throughout April 2006. Additional scoping with BLM was initiated in 2009.

**Tribal Coordination**

The Yomba Tribal Council was notified on May 12, 2006 by District Ranger, Steven Williams regarding the Wild Horse and Burros Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs). During the Tribal Council meeting no concerns or issues were raised. Updates will be provided as they become available.

**Preliminary Issues**

Preliminary Issues related to the proposed action have been identified based upon public comment, tribal government comments, and input from Forest Service specialists. These issues included:

- Vegetation
- Wildlife Species – General/Sensitive
- Horses Appropriate Management Levels (AMLs)
- Range
- Water Resources
- Miscellaneous
- Cultural Resources
- Rare Plants

**Table 4: Summary of the potential impacts**

| Affected Resource      | Summary of potential no action impacts   | Summary of potential proposed action impacts   |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Vegetation/Rare Plants | No known federally listed plants occur in the analysis area. Sensitive plant populations are known to occur within each wild horse territory (WHT), but to date, use by wild horses on these plants has not been documented. The following sensitive plants are known to occur in the analysis area: Eastwood milkvetch, scorpion milkvetch, Toquima milkvetch, Toiyabe buckwheat, Nachlinger catchfly, alpine goldenweed, and arid draba. | Establishing AMLs for each WHT will maintain horse population at levels that promote ecological balance. Furthermore, managing at the designated appropriate management levels (AMLs) will reduce negative |
|                        | With regard to plants, choosing this alternative will reduce the possibility of attaining ecological balance (Brown 2006). Uncontrolled wild horse populations could cause direct disturbance to sensitive plant   |  |

|   |   |   |
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|   | <p>communities. Additionally, riparian habitats could receive excessive herbivory and physical disturbance (e.g., hoof action) at water sources. Impacts in riparian zones may adversely affect Marsh's bluegrass and Nachlinger catchfly. Consequently, unmanaged wild horse populations would result in a downward trend of the ecological status of riparian habitats.</p>   | <p>environmental impacts in degraded areas attributed to wild horses, which may result in an upward vegetative trend.</p>   |
| <p>Wildlife Species (includes Species - Sensitive –</p> | <p>Choosing the no action alternative will reduce the possibility of attaining ecological balance (Brown 2006). Uncontrolled wild horse populations would cause direct disturbance to wildlife and their habitats. Excessive wild horse populations could increase vegetation utilization to levels that exceed the Forest Plan Standards. Additionally, riparian habitats (i.e., ecological status) would move in a downward trend, also exceed Forest Plan standards. Affects of excessive utilization, poor riparian and upland habitats will adversely influence the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat.</p> <p>Excessive wild horse populations could cause direct impacts (i.e., herbivory and/or physical disturbance) to habitats occupied by sensitive wildlife species. Furthermore, the ecological status of riparian habitats may follow a downward trend, due to excessive disturbance from the horses. In the uplands critical sage grouse upland habitats could also be impacted by horse use.</p> | <p>Establishing AMLs for each wild horse territories (WHTs) will maintain horse population at levels that promote ecological balance. Competition for forage and water between wildlife and wild horses will reduce negative environmental impacts in degraded areas. Following implementation of AMLs adequate forage, water, and cover would be available for wildlife, wild horses, and permitted livestock resulting in improvement of condition and function for upland and riparian habitats. Temporary disturbance of wildlife would occur during gather operations, however, this disturbance will be conducted infrequently (only when WHT numbers reach gather threshold) and will be brief in duration.</p> <p>Habitat requirements for sensitive wildlife species will be maintained and/or improved by managing for AML.</p> |
| <p>Horse Distribution Patterns</p>                      | <p>Within each WHT a computer analysis was completed to determine the areas of potential wintering habitat. It was determined that the Monitor and Little Fish Lake WHT have a substantial amount of</p>  |   |

|                        |  |  |
|------------------------|--|--|
|                        | <p>winter habitat where as the other WHTs have limited amount of winter habitat.</p>   |  |
|                        | <p>The no-action alternative will seasonally overstock the adjacent Herd Management Areas (HMAs).</p>  | <p>In the long-term establishing appropriate management levels (AMLs) will not impact the horse distribution patterns only the density of animals. A temporary disturbance of wild horses would occur during gather operations, however, this disturbance will be conducted infrequently (only when WHT numbers reach gather threshold) and will be brief in duration.</p>   |
| <p>Range</p>           | <p>The no-action alternative would not set AMLs for each wild horse territory (WHT) and ecological balance would not be attained. Failing to set wild horse AMLs will result in uncontrolled grazing which may exceed Forest Service livestock utilization standards. If utilization was exceeded before the permitted livestock grazing season the only management tool that could be used is the early removal of livestock.</p>   | <p>Establishing wild horse AMLs will not increase the amount of livestock or season permitted to graze within the WHT. However, wild horse AMLs will reduce the resource competition between livestock, wild horses and wildlife. Additionally, AMLs will lessen the negative environmental impacts in degraded areas. The proposed AMLs will reduce grazing frequency and severity in areas where livestock, wildlife and wild horse grazing overlap. The reduction in grazing frequency and severity may result in an upward ecological trend.</p> |
| <p>Water Resources</p> | <p>The no action alternative would cause negative impacts on water resources due to the increased number of wild horses utilizing streams, springs, seeps, and other riparian areas. These impacts would include excess sedimentation in streams and hillslope erosion due to increased soil compaction and degradation of riparian vegetation. Water quality would also be degraded as concentrations of nutrients and coliform bacteria would increase. The ecological status of riparian areas would experience a downward trend and would fail to meet the standards outlined in the Toiyabe Land and Resource</p> | <p>The proposed action would maintain or improve water resources by managing the numbers of wild horses that would be utilizing streams, springs, seeps, and other riparian areas. Establishing AMLs or each WHT will contribute to maintaining those areas that presently have an acceptable ecological status and will help improve those areas that are below acceptable levels.</p>  |

|                    |  |   |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Cultural Resources | <b>Management Plan.</b><br>Taking no action to set AML will increase impacts to archaeological sites because the horse populations appears to be increasing and there is a positive correlation between total numbers of horses and the amount of damage sites undergo. Not taking any action to limit their numbers will result in increasing damage to archaeological \ sites. | Any reduction in the number of horses will reduce the overall impact horses are having on archaeological sites. The recommended AML may be a fraction of the current populations, and would reduce impacts to archaeological sites. Setting AML implies there may be action taken to reduce horse numbers or fertility. Any ground disturbing locations such as traps or corrals will need the usual compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. |
|--------------------|--|---|

**Monitoring**

Recent vegetation assessments, review of historic data and field observations suggest most of the riparian and upland vegetation are static or moving towards desired conditions with the exception of Burro, Little Fish Lake, and Toquima WHTs. Annual and long-term monitoring will be conducted within all the WHTs to determine if the AML is improving range condition and moving towards desired conditions.

Census flights of wild horse territories will occur at least every 4 years to develop and adjust population estimates. Census methods will be selected to utilize the most effective and cost efficient techniques. Census will be conducted by trained personnel using methods accepted in the scientific community, and techniques will be consistent with current research. At a minimum, the following data will be collected during each census: territory name, date of census, observer(s) name, weather conditions, type of method, type of aircraft used, time of day, location of animals, number of adults, and basic herd health and condition.

At least every 5 years, seasonal distribution maps will be generated to record movements and seasonal use areas of wild horses on each territory. This information is important in evaluating the impact of wild horses on their habitat and determining the impact of proposed range improvement projects on the population. This information will be maintained long term and periodically evaluated to determine changes in distribution and to effectively manage populations for the long term.

Census and monitoring efforts will be coordinated with adjacent BLM HMAs to further promote effective management of HMAs and WHTs.

**Comment Process**

The Austin and Tonopah Ranger Districts of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is providing a 30 day comment period on this proposal and encourages your comments on this proposed action in accordance with Forest Service Appeal regulations (36 CFR 215.11 (a)). Appeal eligibility is limited to those who

provided comment or otherwise expressed interest in this proposed action and submitted comments by the close of the comment period.

Please send your comments to Heather Mobley at P.O. Box 130, 100 Midas Canyon Rd, Austin, NV 89310, (775) 964-2671, Fax: (775) 964-1451; or you may hand-deliver your comments to the above address during normal business hours of 7:30 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding Federal holidays.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

If there is no potential for significant impacts, that finding along with the environmental assessment and a decision notice will be released for public information. If any comments are received on the proposed action then a 45-day appeal period will be provided after release of the environmental assessment and Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact. If the environmental assessment concludes that there is the potential for significant impacts then an environmental impact statement would be prepared. Your comments will help us prepare an environmental assessment on the proposed action.

### **Analysis Process**

A team of specialists has been identified to analyze the environmental effects of the proposed action. Preliminary analysis, displayed below, indicates that impacts to affected resources would be minor and short-term in nature (Table 4). The final results of this analysis will be displayed in the Environmental Assessment (EA) being prepared. If there is no potential for significant impacts, that finding along with the environmental assessment and a decision notice will be released for public information. If any comments are received on the proposed action then a 45-day appeal period will be provided after release of the environmental assessment and Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact. If the environmental assessment concludes that there is potential for significant impacts then an environmental impact statement would be prepared. Your comments will help us prepare an environmental assessment on the proposed action.

### **Responsible Official**

The responsible official for this project is Steven Williams, District Ranger, Austin/Tonopah Ranger Districts, 100 Midas Canyon Road, P.O. Box 130, Austin, Nevada 89310. The telephone number is (775) 964-2671.

### **Contact Person**

For further information regarding this proposal, please contact Heather Mobley or Steven Williams at (775) 964-2671.

