

**Draft**  
**Wild Burro Management in the California Desert:**  
**A Need for Continued Action**

**Purpose and Scope:** Generate financial support for burro capture, adoptions, education, and management on federal and state lands in the California deserts

**Target Audience:**

- Prospective partners and donors
- Private foundations
- Elected officials
- Non government organizations.

**Products/Format:**

1. trifold color brochure
2. 3-5 page report providing addition detail and specific needs/projects

**Background**

In 1971, Congress passed the Wild Horses and Burros Act, which recognizes wild horses and burros as a living symbol of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West that enrich the lives of the American people. The law also charged Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with managing, protecting, and controlling wild horses and burros on the nation's public rangelands to ensure healthy herds and healthy rangelands. The Wild Horse and Burro Act excluded lands managed by the National Park Service (NPS). The NPS, which is mandated to protect and preserve the natural and cultural resources under its jurisdiction for future generations, recognizes wild horses and burros as exotic species which compete with and displace native plants and animals. The NPS goal is to remove wild horses and burros from national parks and preserves.

Since early settlers and miners introduced burros into the southern California desert their numbers have increased dramatically due to a lack of natural predators, their adaptability to the desert environment and the lack of consistent funding for an effective control program. (Figure 1—burro distribution in the Cal deserts). Uncontrolled burro populations have caused resource damage in many areas, particularly in riparian zones and other habitat important for the desert tortoise, bighorn sheep, and other native wildlife species. Because burro can migrate long distances and reproduce rapidly, successful management requires a sustained effort and interagency cooperation.

**Burro Management**

There is a long history of managing wild burro populations in the California deserts. Six agencies and 11 offices currently have active burro management programs (Table 1). In the early 1990's, the Desert Managers Group began discussions aimed at developing a

coordinated, desert-wide plan for managing wild burros. In January 1999, the Strategic Plan for the Management of Wild Burros was finalized which established goals and objectives for burro management and committed NPS, BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service and state agencies to share staff and resources to manage wild burros in the most effective and efficient manner possible (attached).

Burro management in the California desert consists of five major activities: planning, removal of excess animals, adoption, population and habitat monitoring, and herd management. All of these activities are aimed three primary goals:

1. protecting an ecologically appropriate and sustainable burro population on public lands,
2. removing all burros from lands administered by the National Park Service, and
3. treating captured or removed animals in a humane manner.

### **Planning**

Specific areas that will be managed for wild burros and target population level for each herd area are established through each agencies land management plans (Figure 2). BLM populations goals for various herd management areas are summarized in Table 2/Figure 2. In general, the goal of BLM is to manage for a burro population in each identified herd management area that can be sustained in the long-term in the ecological balance with the habitat.

NPS' management goal is to remove all burros from inside the park boundaries and implement actions to ensure that they do not reenter from adjacent public lands. They have identified a three phase approach to achieving this goal:

1. a period where NPS staff/contractors will actively remove and adopt as many burros as possible,
2. a period for animal rights groups to remove any remaining animals; and
3. direct or lethal removal of remaining animals by NPS staff or contractors to achieve a zero population.

Depending on area, NPS is in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the approach. The point at which NPS moves to Phase 3 will depend on the continued success and progress under Phases 1 and 2.

### **Removal**

Burros are captured in the wild using two primary techniques: water trapping and helicopter/wrangler assisted round-ups. In water trapping, thirsty burros enter specially constructed corrals to gain access to a water tank, where they are contained one way gate. This technique is especially effective in areas where water supplies are short and animal have not become "trap shy." Helicopter/wrangler assisted roundups are used when water trapping techniques are not effective. Here, a helicopter and/or wranglers to drive burros into specially contracted corrals. Helicopter/wrangler assisted roundups are very effective but logistically complex and expensive in comparison to water trapping.

Over 2800 burros have been gathered by BLM, NPS and DOD over the past three years (Table 3). All of these burros have or will be placed in BLM or private adoption programs. Population estimates indicated that at least 1,300 excess animals roam the public lands and at least 700 more occur in Death Valley National Park and the Mojave National Preserve. Areas with the highest numbers of excess animals are shown in Figure 3.

### **Adoption**

Aside from capture, the greatest challenge and potential impediment to a successful burro management program is placement of the animals once they are captured. Wild burros make great pets. Animals captured on BLM lands are offered for adoption to qualified people through the BLM's Adopt-a-Horse-or-Burro program. After paying a nominal adoption fee (approximately \$135/animal) and caring for an animal for one year, the adopter is eligible to receive title, or ownership, from the Federal Government. However, while the program is popular, the market for burros under the BLM program is currently saturated. (Include/insert a sidebar on how a person can adopt a wild burro).

In addition to placement through BLM's adoption program, the NPS uses private contractors who market the animals to caring buyers throughout the western U.S. For example, in 1998, Mojave National Preserve also forged an innovative burro placement agreement with the Fund for Animals, a nonprofit animal rights organization to provide a home for animals at their Black Beauty Ranch, a 2,000-acre animal sanctuary in eastern Texas.

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### **Monitoring**

Effective management of burros depends on accurate and timely estimates of the size and distribution of burro populations. In addition, on BLM lands, monitoring of the range conditions is necessary to determine whether habitat conditions are sustainable over time. In FY 01, BLM began working with California Department of Fish and Game on a four-year study to track the movements of both burros and deer within the Picacho and Chocolate-Mule mountain region. BLM also initiated habitat monitoring within the herd management areas, focusing on the impacts of burros on riparian and threatened and endangered species habitat. The Desert Managers Group is working to develop a consistent population census technique for use by all agencies in the California deserts, however, funding is not currently available to implement a comprehensive burro monitoring effort. NEED MORE INFO ON POPULATION MONITORING AND CENSUS TECHNIQUES ON BLM AND NPS LANDS

### **Herd Management**

Burros are free roaming animals that are known to move long distances to find food and water. In some areas geographic barriers, existing highways, and fences keep burros confined to areas where they are supposed to be (and away from areas where they have been excluded). In some areas, it may be feasible to construct fences to control the movement of animals, but fences are generally expensive to build and maintain and create other land management concerns. The distribution of animals can also be controlled to

some degree by providing alternative water sources that eliminate the need for animals to move long distances to find water. This management technique is currently being used to keep burros from congregating along the Colorado River in Piccacho State Park during the hot summer months.

### **A Need for Continue Action**

Much progress has been made over the past three years by land management agencies working cooperatively to manage burro in an ecologically sound and humane manner. However, that progress will be lost unless the effort is sustained. With the rapid reproduction potential of burros (20% per year), populations will quickly grow. The most immediate need, therefore, is to secure funding and expand the adoption capacity sufficiently to reduce burro populations to prescribed management levels on BLM lands and to eliminate all burros from national parks and preserves.

Table 1. Land Management Agencies and Offices in the California desert with active burro management programs

**Department of the Interior**

- Bureau of Land Management
  - Needles Field Office
  - El Centro Field Office
  - Ridgecrest Field Office
  - Yuma Field Office
  
- Fish and Wildlife Service
  - Havasu National Wildlife Refuge
  - Cibola National Wildlife Refuge
  
- National Park Service
  - Death Valley National Park
  - Mojave National Preserve

**State of California**

- Department of Parks and Recreation
  - Colorado Desert State Parks

**Department of Defense**

- Naval Air Warfare Center, China Lake
- National Training Center, Fort Irwin

Table 2. Results of burro gathers and adoptions for FY 99, 00 and 01 with proposed targets for FY 02

	<b>FY99</b>	<b>FY00</b>	<b>FY01</b>	<b>FY02</b>
<b>Planned Number of Burros to be Gathered</b>	1108	1017	1000	1065
<b>Actual Numbers of Burros Gathered</b>				
BLM	184	124	265	675
NPS	600	508	377	100
BLM/NPS	205	197	31	190
BLM/DOD	119	188	246	100
<b>Total Gathered</b>	<b>1108</b>	<b>778</b>	<b>919</b>	<b>1065</b>
Burros Placed				
BLM Adoption	529	457	440	400
Interest Groups/Contractors	579	560	377	100
<b>Total Placed</b>	<b>1108</b>	<b>1017</b>	<b>817</b>	<b>500</b>

**Summary**  
**California Desert Strategic Plan for the Management of Wild Burros**  
**January 8, 1999**

**Parties:** BLM-CDD, Mojave National Preserve, Death Valley National Park

**Goals:**

1. Provide collaborative/efficient burro management in the Cal Deserts
  - Develop coordinated annual operations plan. Seek funds to carry out plan
2. Aggressive manage burros to reach current AML in 3 years
3. Manage burros as part of the natural ecosystem on BLM lands to avoid impacts.
4. Manage for zero burros on non-BLM lands.
  - Determine viable herd management areas
  - Identify long term management objectives/actions and population levels in HMA's
  - Conduct research on burro behavior and movement

**Management Actions**

1. Identify HMA boundaries in BLM plans by 2002 in cooperation with NPS
2. Complete/revise HMA Plans by 2004 that ID conservation measures to protect important habitats
3. Establish key area to monitor range land health
4. Implement management actions to reduce animal drift off BLM lands

**Gathers and Adoptions:**

1. Priorities will be established based on resource issues
2. Each agency will identify numbers and locations of animal to be removed and establish agency priorities annually.
3. When feasible agencies will pool resources to get the job done.
4. Provide steady flow of animals into BLM's adoption program
5. Adoption options: (a) BLM adoption program (b) animal interest groups (c) private contractors (c) NPS direct/indirect adoption programs
  - only burro that spend part of their life on BLM land will enter the BLM adoption program in Kingman or Ridgecrest

**Budget:**

1. Each agency will request funds annually
2. No over head charge assessed on transfer of funds between agencies
3. Removal and deliver cost to be paid for by the agency administering lands where the animals are removed
4. NPS and BLM split cost for holding, feeding, and caring at Ridgecrest
5. BLM pays all cost for adoption