CALIFORNIA DESERT
STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF WILD BURROS

PURPOSE:

This document outlines the California Desert land managing agencies' process to work collaboratively in sharing staff and resources to manage wild burros in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

BACKGROUND:

Wild burros have been roaming the California Desert since introduction by settlers and miners exploring the desert in the late 1800s. Burros are well adapted to the desert southwest. Over the years, without natural predators, the populations increased with deleterious impacts on the desert's natural resources.

Congress passed the Wild, Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971, declaring that the wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West, contribute to the diversity of life forms within the nation, and enrich the lives of the American people. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is charged to manage wild horses and burros on public lands (lands administered by the BLM and US Forest Service) "in the manner that is designed to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance." At the time of the passage of this Act, burros ranged over 5 million acres of the California Desert.

In 1980, the BLM approved the California Desert Conservation Area Plan. Under this plan, BLM would manage 2,747 burros and 4,457,500 acres for wild burro habitat. Subsequently, four different amendments to this plan in 1981, 1983, 1985, and 1986, reduced the burro habitat to 930 burros and 2,202,600 acres. Area specific Herd Management Area Plans (HMAPs) were developed, and significant efforts were made to reduce the over population of burros. More then 18,700 animals were removed from the California Desert from 1981 through 1987.

Since 1987, lack of funding has prevented any substantial removal efforts to maintain appropriate population levels. These uncontrolled populations have led to overgrazing and deterioration of the resources, loss of native plant species, increased soil erosion and loss, and declines in biological diversity, particularly around springs. As a result, resource damage is occurring in sensitive wildlife habitats such as riparian zones, critical threatened and endangered species habitat, and bighorn sheep habitat.

With the passage of the California Desert Protection Act in 1994, over 3 million acres of BLM managed public lands were transferred to the National Park Service for Death Valley National Park, Mojave National Preserve, and Joshua Tree National Park. Much of these lands formally contained burro herd management areas, further reducing the available habitat available on BLM managed lands down to 282 burros and 1,288,000 acres.

Not being subject to the 1971 Act, the National Park Service considers burros to be a feral, exotic species that can negatively impact natural resource values. The National Park Service policy requires that exotic species be eliminated whenever feasible and wherever resource impacts occur.

The Desert Managers agreed in 1994 that, until formal land use plan decisions are issued by the appropriate land management agency, burros within the California Desert will be managed at Appropriate Management Level (AML) as established in the California Desert Plan of 1980. Planning is ongoing by all management agencies to establish AML. Currently, burro populations significantly exceed AML in all management units in the California Desert. Therefore, efforts are ongoing by management agencies to reduce burros to these numbers to the established AML.

Faced with conflicting legal mandates, and the fact that the BLM and its neighbors have considerable distance of common boundaries, a cooperative strategy is the most effective and efficient method of controlling and managing the burro herds in the California. Additionally, BLM California Desert District has been assisting the National Park Service, Department of Navy at China Lake, US Forest Service, US Fish & Wildlife Service and the Chemehuevi Indians to remove and/or adopt animals occupying their lands.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

This strategic plan represents an innovative approach between the signatory land management agencies to implement wild burro management in the California Desert through collaborative sharing of staff and resources in the most efficient manner possible. The goals for the management of wild burros within the California Desert have two focuses: short-term, within the next five years, and long-term, beyond five years.

SHORT-TERM GOAL 1.

> Provide collaborative wild horse and burro management within the California Desert in the most efficient manner possible.

OBJECTIVE:

> Develop Interagency Annual Operation Plans to coordinate the use of staff and resources for all scheduled field activities for the upcoming year. Include animal removal priority and package funding requests within each agency budgetary process as part of the California Desert Innovative Management Laboratory.

SHORT-TERM GOAL 2.

> Manage BLM wild horse and burro populations at current existing AMLs as identified in

the 1980 California Desert Conservation Area Plan, as amended, until land use planning for the various agencies is completed.

OBJECTIVE:

Aggressively remove existing excess horses and burros to reach AMLs within the next three years. Maximize efficiency and reduce operational costs through innovative shared use of staff and resources.

LONG-TERM GOAL

GOAL 3. Manage populations of burros, where appropriate, as an integral part of the natural system on BLM managed lands. Control their numbers where they threaten to alter natural ecosystems, seriously restrict or compete with native flora or fauna, or present a hazard to human health and safety. Manage for zero burro populations on all non-BLM lands.

OBJECTIVES:

A. Determine viable Herd Management Areas (HMAs) from the Herd Areas (HAs) remaining on BLM managed lands within the California Desert District.

B. Identify long-term management objectives and actions, and animal population levels within the remaining viable HMAs. These management objectives will recognize that for agencies managing other than BLM lands, animal prescription levels in excess of zero animals are not appropriate.

C. Conduct scientific research to better understand wild burro behavior and the magnitude and direction of movement patterns for the remaining viable HMAs. This critical information has significant implications for burro management along shared agency boundaries .

MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

The burro management program is composed of several components: habitat and population management, gathers, adoption/placement, and budget. The successful implementation of this burro management strategy requires completing specific management actions in each of these components.

A. HABITAT/POPULATION MANAGEMENT:

Determine and identify, in appropriate land use planning documents, HMA boundaries

within the next three years. BLM is committed to maintaining wild burros on BLM lands. BLM will take the lead to work with the different affected agencies to determine which, if any, remaining herd areas should be managed for retention of animals. Where appropriate, the agencies will take advantage of ongoing land use planning efforts such as the Northern and Eastern Colorado River Management Plan. Local BLM field offices will work cooperatively with affected adjacent land management agencies to conduct comprehensive environmental review of each remaining herd area on BLM managed land. These remaining herd areas include Chemehuevi, Centennial, Clark Mountain, Sand Spring-Last Chance, Chicago Valley, Chocolate-Mule Mountains, Lee Flat, Panamint, Picacho, Piper Mountain, Piute Mountain, Dead Mountain, Slate Range and Waucoba-Hunter Mountain.

Complete/revise specific Herd Management Area Plans for the remaining viable herd management areas within the next five years. Adoption and implementation of these HMAPs will be subject to written approval by BLM through close coordination, consultation and cooperation with adjacent, affected agencies. These HMAPs will identify specific range improvements and conservation measures to support a viable population of wild burros and to protect sensitive resources such as riparian/wetlands and habitat for threatened and endangered species.

BLM and affected agencies will establish key areas to assess and monitor rangeland health in the remaining HMAs, and along common administrative boundaries where burro management occurs. Participating agencies will share staff and resources to develop specific herd management area plans, collect habitat study data, conduct animal populations studies and census.

Actions taken to reduce animal drift off BLM managed lands will include joint agency animal removals; fencing of common boundaries; and fencing of springs, riparian areas, and sensitive resources.

B. GATHERS AND ADOPTIONS:

This strategic plan initially targets animal removals to bring numbers down to established Appropriate Management Levels. Burros will be removed from lands managed by BLM, NPS, Military, US Fish & Wildlife Service, US Forest Service, California State Parks, and Native Americans. These agencies will continue to solicit the support of animal interest groups and private contractors to remove and/or place animals located within their administered lands.

GATHERS:

The removals of excess burros will be prioritized based on resource issues. The combination of water/bait trapping and helicopter-assisted roping will be the

primary methods used to capture the animals. Gathers will be conducted by the agencies, contractors, or appropriate animal interest groups. BLM will coordinate closely with the different agencies when the removed animals are to be placed into the BLM's national adoption program. During annual fiscal year planning, each agency will identify, through their monitoring efforts, the numbers and locations of excess animals. The signatory agencies and units will prioritize removals and review avenues available for animal disposition. When feasible, agencies will pool their resources to accomplish removal efforts within adjacent areas of operation. Animals destined for the BLM's adoption program will be removed throughout the year in small numbers (100 animals per month as a target), through close coordination with BLM's Wild Horse and Burro National Program Office. By providing a somewhat steady, small flow of burros into the national adoption program year-long, sufficient numbers can be removed without overloading the system, thereby significantly reducing holding costs.

ADOPTIONS:

Burros removed from the California Desert will be adopted/placed through one of four sources: 1) BLM national adoption program, 2) animal interest groups, 3) private contractors, or 4) direct or indirect adoption programs of the NPS. Animals determined to be protected under the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act will be restricted to entering the BLM's adoption program. All animals identified to be placed within the BLM's national adoption program will be transported to either Kingman or Ridgecrest corral facilities for preparation, holding and shipment. The National Park Service will continue to retain assistance from animal humane groups to find suitable homes for animals gathered from park lands not identified to be placed into the BLM system. Through close operational coordination between the different agencies, and these other groups, animals removed from the California Desert long-term can be rapidly adopted.

C. BUDGET:

Each agency will submit annual funding requests to accomplish their responsibilities identified within this strategy. The service charge typically associated with exchange of funds between agencies will be waived for all activities connected with burro management within the California Desert. As a member of the Desert Managers Group, this also applies to Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

The removal costs and delivery to designated preparation facilities will be borne by the agency administering the lands occupied by the targeted animals. For animals that BLM agrees to process through their adoption program, the BLM and NPS agree to each pay one half the actual costs incurred at Ridgecrest for preparation of the animals (holding,

feeding, caring). BLM will incur all costs of the placement of these animals in the national adoption program.

This strategy becomes effective when signed by all parties and may be amended at any time by mutual written consent of the parties. Notice of proposed changes must be submitted to the other parties at least sixty (60) days in advance of the proposed changes. This strategy can be terminated at any time by written notification of the parties at least thirty (30) days in advance to affect termination.

SIGNATURES:

District Manager
BLM California Desert District

1-8-99
Date

Superintendent
Mojave National Preserve

1-8-99
Date

Superintendent
Death Valley National Park

1/8/99
Date

ATTACHMENT 1

FY99 ANNUAL OPERATING PLAN

In fy99 the agencies agree to operate under the terms of the California Desert Interagency Burro Strategy in the capture and adoption of wild horses and burros. Each agency may pursue captures independently, or may work together where sharing of resources proves beneficial. These cooperative efforts will be worked out by the resource staff actually performing the animal captures.

BLM will place up to 800 wild horses and burros into their national adoption program based on the numbers and locations outlined below. The agencies understand that the placement of 800 animals in FY99 by BLM is contingent on the animals being successfully adopted at a consistent rate and not being held in the corrals for an excessive period of time. BLM may notify agencies to stop delivery of animals at any time until the backlog of animals are adopted. The NPS agrees to pay BLM $125 per animal accepted for placement. Each agency may also pursue other adoption initiatives as their authority allows.

The following areas and numbers of animals are targeted for BLM removal and placement into the BLM adoption program in FY99:

Centennial/Slate Range HMA	60 burros, 40 horses
Piute Mtn. HMA	50 burros
Colorado River	100 burros
Imperial Valley, Chocolate Mtns. Gunnery Range, Coachella Canal	100 burros
Shadow Valley	150 burros
Panamints, Saline Valley (Death Valley)	100 burros
Granites Mtns. (Mojave)	100 burros
Ft. Irwin	100 burros