



Wild Horses

RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

Pryor Mountain horses (*Equus caballus*) are one of the few feral or, more popularly, wild horse populations in the US with strong Spanish ancestries. The population is restricted to the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range (PMWHR), created in 1968 and includes land inside and adjacent to Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. The horses are protected as “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West” under the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, which requires management to achieve and maintain a “thriving natural ecological balance” on public lands used by the horses. The population is considered a unique genetic resource since horses of this type are no longer present in Spain. The horses also provide visitor enjoyment and are the subject of great public interest. The PMWHR is managed by an interagency group led by the Bureau of Land Management.



Harems at Salt Lick Pond/ Photo by Kayla Grams

Status and Trend

Horses have been present in the Pryor Mountains since at least the early 1800s. In 1968, the population consisted of approximately 200 horses and has since varied between 86 and 270 horses. In 1984, the population was managed at 121 horses in consideration of the range’s carrying capacity. The Appropriate Management Level, which considers rangeland health and multiple-use, was lowered to $95 \pm 10\%$ in 1992 where it has remained. Between 1996 and 2006, the population was managed and controlled around 160 horses. The population is monitored year-round and has been controlled by contraception since 2001 and by removals, which occur every 2–4 years.

Discussion

The Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 considers horses an “integral part of the natural system of the public lands” and requires managers to consider all values of the land. Since horses have few natural predators, a limited range, and a high growth rate (approximately 18%), the population must be controlled. The Natural Resources Conservation Service conducted a comprehensive inventory and assessment of the range’s health in 2004 and determined the carrying capacity of the range varies between 45 and 142 horses. Horses share the PMWHR with mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*); there is potential for competition with bighorn sheep. Recent management activities include additional fertility control, removals by bait-trapping, water catchments repairs, and prescribed burns for range improvements. The interagency management group continues to discuss issues related to managing for a healthy herd on a healthy rangeland. The group is currently evaluating the 1984 Herd Management Area Plan for possible revision.

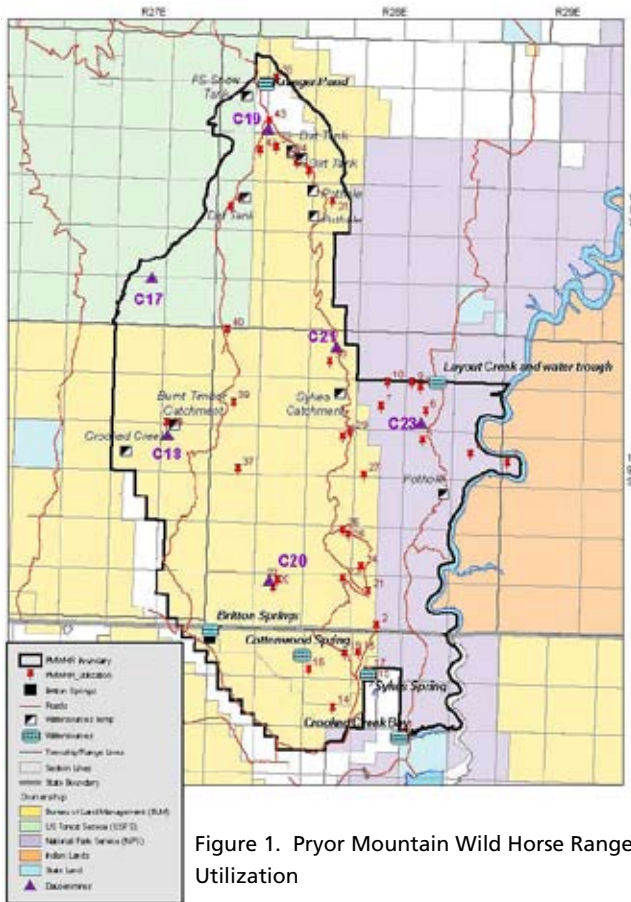


Figure 1. Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range: Utilization