BAIT-TRAPPING PROPOSAL

for the wild horses of
Disappointment Valley’s
Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area

by Kathryn Wilder, TJ Holmes,
and the National Mustang Association/Colorado chapter board of directors
in conjunction with
Four Corners Back Country Horsemen
and Mesa Verde Back Country Horsemen
(Disappointment Wild Bunch Partners)

Photos by TJ Holmes
The BLM is committed to continuously improving its management of wild horses and burros. Deploying this new method of bait trapping enhances our ability to gather animals more effectively in certain areas of the West, while minimizing the impact to the animals. ” ~ Joan Guilfoyle, BLM wild horse and burro division chief, reported in the Paulick Report, www.paulickreport.com, April 1, 2012

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Introduction

The Colorado chapter of the National Mustang Association, in conjunction with Four Corners Back Country Horsemen and Mesa Verde Back Country Horsemen, supports BLM’s stated goal of managing Spring Creek Basin’s wild horse herd in thriving ecological balance with their range, and urges the Tres Rios Field Office to embrace bait trapping as a management tool for the Spring Creek Basin mustangs.

The simple concept of bait trapping is to bait the horses into a trap to capture them instead of using other modes of capture, such as helicopter driving. Bait trapping is easier on the horses, more humane, and more cost-effective than using helicopters. The following pages elaborate on the concept of bait trapping and explain why it’s both desirable and doable in Spring Creek Basin.

Why is capture important?

The first question often asked by the public is: “Why must wild horses be removed from their range?” The BLM says it has an overpopulation problem in the wild-horse herds of the West. We understand that there is a problem: Tens of thousands of wild horses and burros live on public land, and 50,000 are kept in short- and long-term holding facilities, more than are managed in the wild. We understand that solutions are challenging and require resources such as money, facilities, time, and commitment.

Another way of looking at the problem of overpopulation, however, is that BLM has a reproduction issue. Because there are few remaining natural predators of the wild horse, and because their range has been reduced in size since the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act was signed in 1971, when left to the natural rhythms of reproduction, births outnumber deaths annually.

We are actively seeking methods other than removal to control the population. PZP, a fertility-control vaccine, has been used in Spring Creek Basin since 2011. Its use has slowed the conception rate in the basin, but because a limited number of mares were allowed to be darted during the first two years of the program, the full positive impact of PZP in Spring Creek Basin’s herd has been delayed. In future years, with the increase in the number of darted mares allowed (initiated in 2014), the frequency of removals should diminish.
Meanwhile, because the full effect of PZP is not immediate, the likelihood exists that in the next few years, horses will need to be removed from the basin. By the end of 2014, the total herd population will approach the maximum appropriate management level (the AML for Spring Creek Basin is 35 to 65 adult horses). Therefore we feel the urgency of submitting this proposal to help with the bait-trapping planning process, which needs to begin now.

What is bait trapping?

Techniques vary according to the dictates of the herd management area: feed sources and availability, water, types of terrain, and accessibility.

Bait can be mineral salt, hay, water, a mare in heat, etc. Portable panels that meet BLM standards first are set up in a partial corral around the bait in the chosen location. When horses become familiar with the bait and the trap, panels are added to eventually enclose the bait. When horses are inside, a remote-control device can trip the gate closed, or one-way gates may be used. Personnel – BLM and/or volunteers – are on-site during trapping in which remote-control gate releases are used, or traps are checked frequently.

In the case of our well-documented herd, any horses not previously selected for removal are released. The selected horse(s) can be transported to the temporary holding facility.

Why is bait trapping a desirable alternative to helicopter roundups?

Simple answer:

1) Far more cost-effective 
2) Easier for the horses 
3) Better publicity for BLM.

1) Cost-effectiveness

Figures obtained from other herd management areas and wild horse territories indicate that, on average, bait trapping costs less than helicopter-driven roundups. Sources
contacted: managers of Spring Creek Basin Herd Management Area, Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, Little Book Cliffs Wild Horse Range, McCullough Peaks Herd Management Area, and Jicarilla Wild Horse Territory.

It is important to note that as of 2012, BLM has divided the western states into six zones, and private contractors bid on and received a contract for one or more zones. Either BLM-approved contractors or in-house personnel and volunteers have carried out BLM bait-trapping operations. Some differences in cost are noted below.

**Helicopter roundups:**

- **2007 Spring Creek Basin HMA roundup:** Figures presented to NMA/CO by then-herd manager Bob Ball indicated that the overall roundup cost BLM $75,000. Eighty horses were removed. The **per-horse cost was $937.**

- **2011 Spring Creek Basin HMA roundup:** The total cost of the roundup, according to information given to NMA/CO by BLM, was $120,000. The increase in cost was, in part, because of higher security and lawsuits (Spring Creek Basin became a target area for protesters trying to stop the helicopter-driven roundup and removal of wild horses). Forty horses were removed. The **per-horse cost was $2,400.**

**Bait trapping:**

- **2012 Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range roundup:** “Overall, the labor costs were relatively low for an in-house gather on the Pryor; it ran about **$400 per horse.** … All in all, about 80% of the on-ground work was completed by myself and two seasonal employees. We also received some volunteer labor, and support and labor from our NPS partners.” Jared Bybee, rangeland management specialist, Montana/Dakotas state wild horse and burro specialist, and Pryor Mountain herd manager, Billings (Montana) Field Office

- **2013 McCullough Peaks HMA roundup:** “The bait trap costs (contracted) were about **$1,700 per horse.** … I really think going in-house when you are trying to catch 20 horses is the way to go. I am sure we could do this with staff for much cheaper.” Tricia Hatle, BLM rangeland management specialist and McCullough Peaks Herd Management Area manager, Cody (Wyoming) Field Office
2) Easier for the horses

As advocates for the Spring Creek Basin herd and each horse within the herd, we believe the fact that bait trapping causes significantly less stress on the horses should be a primary consideration. Again, the simple explanation: Bait trapping is far less traumatic than helicopter-driven roundups. Horses are not run, chased, or herded toward an enclosure. Their flight response is minimized. After time to settle in the pen, the horses can be loaded quietly and transported to the temporary holding facility.

In general, fewer injuries and deaths are attributed to bait trapping than to helicopter-driven roundups.

3) Publicity

Negative publicity surrounding helicopter roundups is increasing, whereas bait trapping is less controversial. The 2011 Spring Creek Basin roundup presents an example: Appeals and lawsuits were filed after the independent film *Wild Horses and Renegades* was shown in Telluride. Protesters were at the roundup; fences were cut in numerous locations; horses escaped the herd management area; a foal was orphaned; a rogue airplane pilot harassed the herd before the roundup started, then dogged the helicopter pilot while horses were being driven; and the cost of the roundup escalated because additional law-enforcement officers were needed.

In contrast, there was no public outcry resulting from the 2013 Little Book Cliffs bait-trapping operation. The same is true for ongoing bait trapping at Jicarilla Wild Horse Territory.

Because Spring Creek Basin and its mustangs are known to the local public as well as a growing national base, we must consider the public’s opinion in how we approach future removals.

With the use of documentation and PZP, Spring Creek Basin has become a model herd management area. Implementing bait trapping will further our progressive momentum.

“Of all the range of options available to the BLM, the bait traps are the best method. The baiting process is so much quieter and doesn’t involve the terror, the panic, that goes along with being chased by a helicopter.” Scott Beckstead, Oregon director of the Humane Society of the United States, reported by Jefferson Public Radio, www.ijpr.org, Southern Oregon University, Feb. 5, 2014
Is bait trapping doable in Spring Creek Basin?

Yes! Why?

- This herd is well documented, and population growth is being managed with the use of PZP. Bait trapping is a complementary management tool.

- Documentation enables the selective removal of certain horses with regard to age, gender, and genetics.

- The use of PZP to slow population growth within the herd enables the removal of fewer horses less often.

- Spring Creek Basin is almost 22,000 acres of mostly open range, with a mixture of perimeter and interior roads. Traps can be set up in areas accessible by vehicles.

- Infrastructure is available from the Grand Junction Field Office, which is located about three hours away from Spring Creek Basin.

- Disappointment Wild Bunch Partners, which includes the Colorado chapter of the National Mustang Association, Four Corners Back Country Horsemen, and Mesa Verde Back Country Horsemen, represents a strong volunteer base to support bait-trapping activities. Together, the groups have a combined total of close to 40 years of advocacy for Spring Creek Basin's wild horses.

- An option for holding horses captured during the operation is located immediately adjacent to Spring Creek Basin, potentially less than 10 miles away from any interior trap site. Volunteers will be available for horse care and public education.

“Thanks to the help of our partners, the BLM is pleased with the success we’ve had using bait trapping as a method to remove excess wild horses ...” Kristen Lenhardt, BLM representative, as reported by Patti Carpenter on the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign blog, www.wildhorsepreservation.org, on Aug. 30, 2012

The only objection to bait trapping that we can see is that it takes longer than helicopter-driven roundups. However, it can be done with fewer people and therefore still be more cost-effective. For example, at Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range in 2012, the in-house bait trapping was done by the herd manager, two seasonal range technicians, and volunteers. Little Book Cliffs’ was done with two BLM employees and many volunteers.
There is no reason not to use bait trapping as the next evolutionary step in the progressive management of this herd.

Options for temporary holding facilities to hold trapped horses while others are being captured:

It is necessary to consider where the horses would go and be cared for once trailered away from the trap site.

Following are several options:

1. **The Serengeti Foundation’s wild horse sanctuary**
   - Proximity to Spring Creek Basin: seven to 10 miles from trap to holding corrals
   - Ease of transition – the horses do not have to adjust to dramatic change in venue
   - Intact infrastructure, including a BLM-approved chute that allows processing, which includes branding, vaccinations and drawing blood for Coggins testing. The Flying W chute was purchased by NMA/CO with the guidance of Fran Ackley, wild horse specialist at Cañon City.
   - BLM-approved corral design
   - Public access as approved by BLM and ranch by agreement
   - Local viewing and adoption
   - Feed and care costs.

2. **Private ranch, such as Cachuma Ranch, Dolores**
   - Proximity to Spring Creek Basin: approximately 70 miles from trap to ranch
   - Stress of trailering but quiet environment once on site
   - Portable chute for processing would have to come from Grand Junction
   - BLM-approved corral design, using temporary panels from BLM
   - Horses would be available for local viewing/adoption.
   - Feed and care costs.

3. **Montezuma County Fairgrounds**
   - Proximity to Spring Creek Basin: approximately 85 miles from the trap to the fairgrounds
   - Increased stress because of longer trailer ride; high-stress environment because of human and automotive traffic
   - Portable chute for processing would come from Grand Junction
- Horses would be available for local viewing/adoption.
- Feed and care costs plus facility rental.

**Cañon City**

- Proximity to Spring Creek Basin: approximately 10 hours by trailer from trap to holding facility
- Stress of trailering
- Intact infrastructure for processing and holding
- Horses would not be available for local viewing and adoption.
- Check with Fran Ackley for costs of feed, care, and holding for undetermined length of time (according to BLM spokesperson Tom Gorey in 2010, average lifetime care costs for one horse was about $20,000).

**Conclusion**

Progressive solutions to the overall issue of population challenges exist.

Because we have a known and manageable herd in Spring Creek Basin, we’re able to practice the most up-to-date scientific and humane approaches to managing and protecting our mustangs. These include documentation, PZP fertility control, and bait trapping.

Having an active, dedicated group of volunteers will help BLM reduce labor costs associated with bait trapping. Reducing costs in combination with reducing stress to these horses is in keeping with BLM’s stated commitment to “continuously improving its management of wild horses and burros,” according to Joan Guilfoyle.

We strongly urge Tres Rios Field Office managers to implement in-house bait trapping in partnership with NMA/CO, 4CBCH, MVBCH, and the Serengeti Foundation, thereby modeling the best of modern mustang management and community involvement.