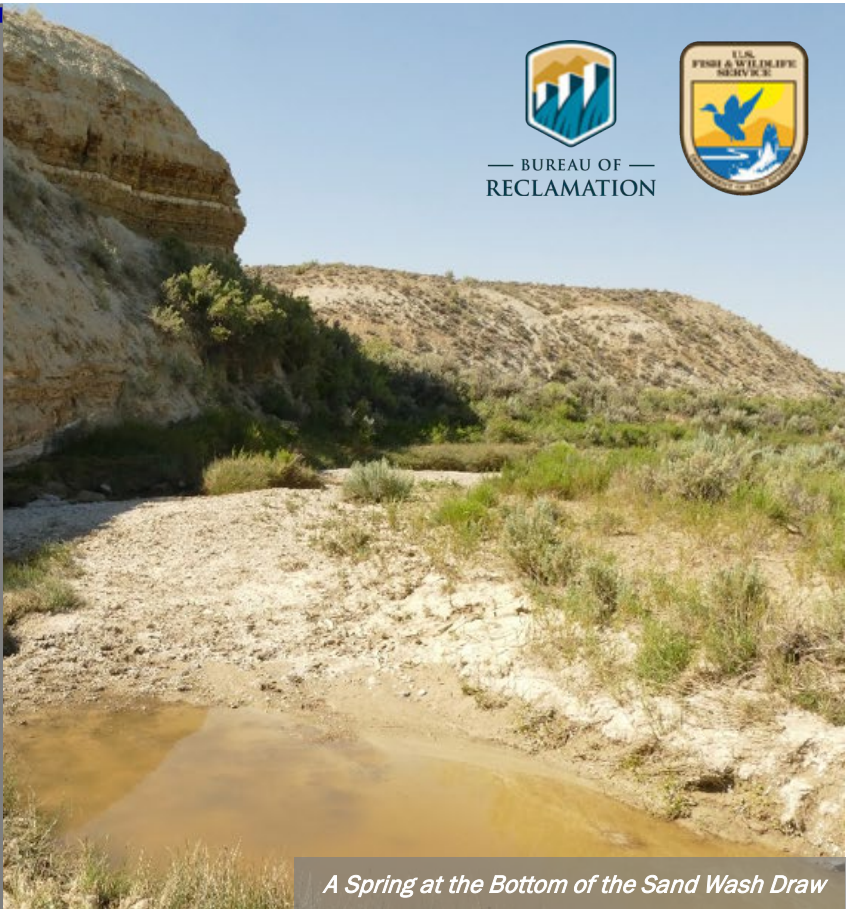


RESTORATION

Drought Mitigation through Land Management and Water Distribution for Wild Horses



Situated in northwest Colorado, the Sand Wash Basin constitutes 157,730 acres of high-elevation desert. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees 154,940 of those acres as public land. Widely distributed ponds in the basin support a variety of wildlife. However, during the drought of 2018, several ponds dried up entirely leaving few remaining watering sources. From July to October, the nonprofit organization Wild Horse Warriors (WHW), in accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding with the BLM, hauled over 3,000 gallons of water per day into the basin to reduce land degradation near overcrowded ponds and to provide water to wild horses and other wildlife.



A Spring at the Bottom of the Sand Wash Draw

KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

Colorado is experiencing more frequent and intense droughts contributing to water scarcity and rapid land degradation. Drought in the Sand Wash Basin contributes to a lack of available water stored in the ponds that dot the Herd Management Area. Vegetation surviving around water sources is continuously impacted when animals concentrate around those that still hold water. While domestic livestock stocking levels can be adjusted, wild horses cannot be removed from the land in times of drought, so the BLM and organizations like the WHW have to come up with alternative solutions to support wild horses while minimizing their impacts on the landscape when it is extremely vulnerable.

PROJECT GOALS

- Maintain healthy partnerships between stakeholders with different goals
- Create sources of water for wildlife in locations with dry ponds
- Prevent land degradation from wildlife around remaining natural water sources

PUBLIC SUPPORT

By calling for public support, the WHW was able to fund all the summer water hauls, including the purchase of tanks, with private donations.



Wild Horses Gathering around Lake Pond

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Collaborative Partnerships: A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the BLM and support from the State Director provided access to the WHW to complete the project under guidance by the BLM. With multiple stakeholders invested in overseeing the range management, this project functioned as a cross-stakeholder collaboration.

Network of Water Sources: The range between water sources was limited to maintain an average travel distance of six miles or less. Known watering sources were targeted as sites for water tanks to maintain the natural landscape and preserve wild horses' behavior and routine. Archeologists were consulted to verify that the distributed water tanks would not harm any cultural sites.

Water Collection: Water was primarily provided by the regional fire department until directed elsewhere due to water restrictions in the county, at which time the water hauling company purchased water from private ponds owned by ranchers.

Overflight: In September of 2018, the BLM flew over the Herd Management Area in a double-observer census of wild horses. During this flight, observers found available water sources that could not be observed from the roadside.

Collaborators

- Wild Horse Warriors
- Bureau of Land Management

Lead Author: Emily Bickle, Drought Learning Network, September 2020.

Photos courtesy of Cindy Wright/WHW
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Visit CCAST:



LESSONS LEARNED

Knowing the proper channels that must be pursued with partners will accommodate the varying needs for a project's success. Understanding the motivations of partners is important for working toward mutually acceptable outcomes.

Fully exploring all options at the outset is beneficial. Conducting an aerial tour over the land to inspect current water sources and wildlife, for example, can inform decision-makers on all sides of the true necessity of supplemental water during drought. Once deemed necessary, monitoring wild horses throughout the water hauls is also beneficial.

All the wild horses being monitored on the basin survived the extreme drought. Observations of reduced water levels in tanks, sometimes depleted entirely, indicated that supplemental watering sources were used by wild horses and other wildlife.

Key characteristics of the landscape and soils can be used to make the most effective use of available water. For example, sandy-bottomed ponds were avoided because water would have quickly infiltrated.

NEXT STEPS

- Maintain regular monitoring of water levels, especially during spring and summer months
- Use existing storage tanks for subsequent water hauls
- Evaluate hauling water to existing ponds and/or ponds that have dried up
- Monitor and document wild horse and wildlife sightings for short- and long-term survival

For more information on this project, contact Cindy Wright:

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A Wild Horse with Her Foal