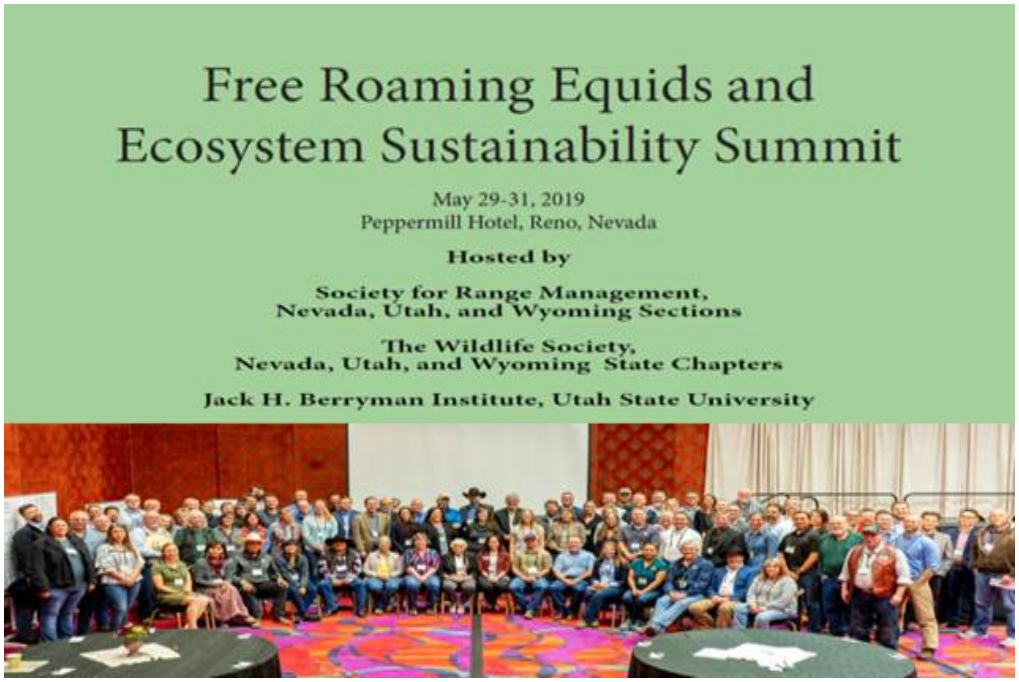
2019 Free-roaming Equid and Ecosystem Sustainability Summit



Delegates from over 90 different organizations convened at the Free-Roaming Equids and Ecosystem Sustainability Summit, held May 29-31, 2019 in Reno, Nevada in search of common ground to achieve the goal of "healthy herds on healthy rangelands." The Summit was hosted by The Wildlife Society, the Society for Range Management, the Berryman Institute, and Nevada Bighorns Unlimited. The purpose of the Summit was "to develop a stakeholder-based comprehensive communication strategy and processes to managing free-roaming equids in concert with other public lands multiples-use to achieve western rangeland ecosystem sustainability." The delegates shared the goal of sustaining 'Healthy Herds on Healthy Rangelands'. They also agreed to seek wide public support and a vision for solutions that are agreeable to all the organizations and individuals represented by Summit delegates and society at large. The delegates recognized that there is not one single solution, but that all solutions must be economically, biologically, ecologically, and ethically practical. They also recognized that the solutions must fully engage state legislatures, the U.S. Congress, interested non-governmental organizations, and private individuals in funding innovative ideas to be tested, and practical alternatives to be implemented that represent the values and desires of diverse public stakeholders, and are within the purview and management authority of the BLM, USFS, Native American Tribes, and the states.

The Reno Summit fostered a "non-political" grassroots movement now known as the Free-Roaming Equid and Ecosystem Sustainability Network or FREES. FREES seeks to enhance communication and engage diverse stakeholder groups in meaningful dialogue as we work together to realize a common goal of "healthy herds on healthy rangelands." Participation in FREES is open to all individuals and organizations, regardless of perspectives. FREES seeks to integrate sound science with local knowledge, human perceptions, and values into a collaborative national network of information sharing, planning, and action. FREES is committed to seeking to better understand and respect individual opinions while striving to develop meaningful, actionable objectives to be implemented judiciously, compassionately, humanely, and expeditiously. FREES endorses diversity and seeks to engage diverse publics in developing solutions that are consensus based and agreeable to the preponderance of public land and free-roaming equid stakeholders. FREES also recognizes that there is not one single solution, and as such strives to create innovative and practical strategies that are scientifically sound and are within the purview and management authority of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the USDA Forest Service, Native American Tribes, and the states. To fund the strategies, FREES recognizes that the U.S. Congress and Executive Branch, state legislatures, non-governmental organizations, and private individuals must be fully engaged. As there are multiple coalitions and groups convening to address the needs of equids, it should be clarified that FREES delegates are participating in the process as representative of different interested agencies and organizations and not as members of the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board.

Areas of potential agreement:

Free-roaming horses and burros must be managed in a manner that is respectful of animal welfare, all other multiple-use on public lands, and recognition that rangeland health must be maintained.
Each area inhabited by free-roaming horses and burros is unique and should be managed and prioritized for action based on their ecological state, current free-roaming horse and burro populations, and health of land and animals.
Most HMAs inhabited by WHBs exceeds ecological carrying capacity
Gathers are the only means for removing excess WHBs and thus should integrate fertility control options with animal removal
Management actions must be prioritized that achieve an ecologically sustainable management level of free-roaming horses and burros through non-lethal means. To accomplish this will require a significant initial investment that will decrease over time as more efficient fertility control methods become available and horse and numbers in long-term holding facilities decrease through adoption and natural mortality.
Free-roaming horse and burro fertility management research must be supported to develop new techniques that may be applicable to unique HMA, tribal or state, management conditions.
The application of existing fertility control methods should be used based on efficacy unique to the WHBs HMAs and areas inhabited by free-roaming horses and burros
Stakeholder inability to achieve broad consensus and actions are likely to predicate actions and policies that are unacceptable across the spectrum of stakeholders.
Unified messaging to the U. S. Congress and the public is essential to better inform them about the WHB and other free-roaming horse and burro management needs, exponential growth potential of the herds and corresponding exponential ecological damage and gain support for long-term funding.

Photo (above) is of three bands of horses waiting to water at an impacted waterhole on the Pine Nut Herd Management Area near Reno, NV. In 2017, the population estimate was 694 horses; 258% of the appropriate management level of 118-179 horses.