

# **Winecup Gamble Ranch**

## **Wild Horse Sanctuary**

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## Executive summary

The Winecup Gamble Ranch consists of one million acres of deeded and public lands in northeast Nevada, which is the approximate geographical center of the BLM's Wild Horse Allotment Areas. The owner of the Ranch has committed to use the Ranch's agricultural assets and is willing to change the Ranch from a full-time cattle operation to a Wild Horse Sanctuary. A Winecup Gamble Wild Horse Sanctuary can be implemented in a manner that provides a natural environment for the wild horses and protects and preserves important wildlife and environmental values. A Winecup Gamble Wild Horse Sanctuary will also allow BLM to address issues associated with wild horse population control through selection rather than the use of sterility drugs or euthanasia. Importantly, there will be no reproduction of the wild horses on the Ranch.

A recent satellite forage study confirms that the Ranch can support both 8,000 to 10,000 horses and existing wildlife populations. The horse inventory on the Ranch could be increased to 15,000 to 17,000 head with additional investments by the Ranch and the public in improvements that develop existing water and other Ranch resources.

The Ranch offers the opportunity for significant cost savings for the BLM Wild Horse Program. A Winecup Gamble Wild Horse Sanctuary also offers the opportunity for unprecedented public access to the wild horses through the development of a Wild Horse Sanctuary Visitor's Center and related public accommodations on the Ranch. The Ranch, or an appropriate nonprofit foundation, could also establish an aggressive adoption program that maximizes the number of adoptions by implementing a horse training program that will make it easier for the public to successfully handle the horses.

A change in Ranch operations from a cattle operation to a Wild Horse Sanctuary will require long-term agreements in order to justify the investments and other required changes. There are at least two, and perhaps more, options for the use of the Ranch as a Wild Horse Sanctuary. First, BLM could maintain ownership of the horses and lease the Ranch for use as a Sanctuary, which would require a long-term agreement with the Ranch and changes in the current law regarding public lands and fencing restrictions. The second option would be for the Sanctuary or a non-profit foundation to purchase the horses, and use the Ranch for a Sanctuary pursuant to long-term agreements with the Ranch and appropriate agreements with BLM that establish a mechanism for the payment of the operating and fixed costs associated with the use of the Ranch as a Wild Horse Sanctuary. Although the Ranch takes no position on the issue of whether ownership of the horses should remain with BLM or be transferred to a non-profit foundation, other interested parties have suggested that ownership of the horses be transferred to the Sanctuary or an appropriate foundation.

## Proposed Winecup Gamble Wild Horse Sanctuary Management Plan

### Objectives:

1. Create a Wild Horse Sanctuary that provides BLM with the ability to address the unsustainable population growth of the wild horse herds in the BLM Wild Horse Allotment Areas in a cost effective manner that is acceptable to the public and avoids the use of chemical sterilization or euthanasia as population control measures.
2. Manage the Winecup Gamble Wild Horse Sanctuary in a manner that protects and preserves wildlife and other natural resources on the Ranch.
3. Provide a more natural environment for the wild horses than exists in BLM's other short and long term holding facilities.
4. Use the economies of scale that are provided by the Winecup Gamble Ranch to provide BLM with management options for its excess wild horse inventory that are more cost effective than existing BLM short and long term facilities and which provide a reasonable rate of return for the Ranch.
5. Provide the public with unprecedented access to the wild horses in a natural environment and enhance the BLM's Wild Horse Adoption Program.

### Proposed Operations:

The Winecup Gamble Ranch will operate the Sanctuary under the direct supervision of BLM personnel assigned to and stationed on the Ranch.

The Winecup Gamble Ranch will be divided into four divisions:

**Receiving Division.** The Receiving Division will include new facilities designed with the help of BLM and used to receive horses directly from the Wild Horse Allotment Areas to provide veterinary services and the opportunity for the horses to recover from the initial stress associated with capture and transfer. The Receiving Division will also include facilities that will be used for a Wild Horse Adoption Program, including a horse training program that will allow more people to adopt a wild horse.

**Transitional Division.** Wild horses will be transferred from the Receiving Division to the Transitional Division after they have recovered from the initial stress. The Transitional Division will include over 5,000 acres of private land divided into ten to fifteen pastures, where supplemental feed will be provided. The horses will be classified for age and other characteristics, with special attention to pregnant mares and mares with colts. All of the horses will remain in

the transitional facilities until they adapt to the facilities, can be called to feed, respect fences and or selected as candidates for adoption.

**Growing Season Division.** The Growing Season Division will include 7,000 acres of private irrigated and sub-irrigated meadows and 3,000 acres of mechanically irrigated farm ground, with additional acreage of mechanically irrigated farm ground to be added in the Spring of 2010. The horses will be located in the meadows and pastures adjacent to the farmlands from approximately May 1 through August 31. The grazing provided by the meadows and pastures will be supplemented with hay and grains harvested from the adjacent farm grounds. Grazing on the meadows will be controlled by using timing and cell grazing techniques. The Growing Season Division can currently support 11,000 to 13,000 horses for a period of 4 to 5 months. The capacity of the Growing Season Division can be expanded with the development of additional farmlands.

**Dormant Season Division.** Horses will be located on the Dormant Season Division from approximately September 1 to April 30. The Dormant Season Division will utilize naturally occurring forage on the approximately 935,000 acres of the Ranch that are not included in the other Divisions. Horses will be managed to use the high elevation range in the fall and early winter, and lower pastures in late winter and early spring. The Dormant Season Division can support approximately 9,000 wild horses using the AUM's currently allocated for the Ranch, less an adjustment for horses.

The division of the Ranch into four operating divisions has a number of advantages:

1. The Receiving Division will allow the BLM (or the Sanctuary, if delegated that responsibility) to provide focused care for newly arrived horses and an enhanced opportunity for and expanded adoption program.
2. The Transitional Division is primarily to provide initial training to the horses, to include calling them to feed, familiarizing them with fences and classifying them according to certain criteria. Special attention will be given to mares in foal or with colts. Moreover, unlike other existing BLM short-term holding facilities, where horses are kept in confined facilities for months or even years, the horses will remain in this Division only for the time required for them to adapt and be released to the Growing Season and Dormant Season Divisions located elsewhere on the Ranch (probably 60 days or less). This Division will have significantly more space per horse -- up to 2 acres -- than existing BLM short-term holding facilities located elsewhere, which are ordinarily no more than 700 square feet.
3. The horses will have more than adequate water during the hot summer months because they will be located in the Growing Season Division where the Ranch has developed its water resources for livestock and irrigation purposes. In addition, the Growing Season Division is located in the middle of the Ranch, which

substantially reduces the risk that the horses will stray off of the Ranch during the summer grazing season.

4. Water consumption in riparian areas will be minimized by season of use, natural moisture and the proximity of horses to naturally-occurring water sources, which are plentiful on the Ranch.
5. The wild horses will have access to over 900,000 acres of range for the seven and one half months that they are located on the Dormant Season Division of the Ranch, which will provide a far more natural environment and life-span for the horses than is available on other BLM short and long term holding facilities.
6. The Growing Season Division produces enough forage to support 52,000 AUM's, and with each 1,000 acres of farm ground brought into production, it will produce an additional 12,000 AUM's, thus providing a surplus of forage. Frequent oversight and care will be provided during the growing season, which will help in controlling the horses during the dormant season. Additionally, all of the growing season areas are located in Thousand Springs Valley, which is in the middle of the ranch. Therefore, there is no threat of estrayed horses on neighboring properties during their summer grazing period.
7. The use of the Dormant Season Division will provide significant ecological advantages because these lands will not be used during the growing season for the native vegetation. The use of these lands during the fall, winter and early spring will allow all of the plants to attain their maximum growth during the summer and protect the riparian areas from overuse. The Sanctuary will also reduce its AUM's by 20% to account for the differences between cattle and horses, and the utilization rate will be managed so that the horses only use 50% of the available forage in order to protect the environment and wildlife. All of these factors have been analyzed using satellite mapping data.
8. The Dormant Season Division will be used at times when neighboring ranchers are not using adjacent lands, which will minimize the effect of any estrayed horses from the Sanctuary.
9. This Proposal is based on currently available Ranch resources. The Ranch also has a five-year plan for the development and beneficial use of its 53,000+ acre-feet of water. The addition of 4,000 to 5,000 acres of mechanically irrigated lands will add between 45,000 and 50,000 AUM's. In addition, the existing 130,000 acres of seedings on the ranch (half of which are in the spring grazing areas and need re-seeding) will produce another 20,000 AUM's. With these improvements to the forage base and some additional infrastructure improvements, the number of horses can be increased to 15,000 to 17,000. At the same time, the Ranch will continue to make improvements to the environmental and wildlife resources.

**Cost Savings.** The integration of the Receiving, Transition, Growing Season and Dormant Season Divisions within one Ranch will be better for the horses and will also provide substantial transportation, administration and other cost savings for BLM when compared to existing operations that gather the horses in one location, transport the horses to and hold them in short term holding facilities located elsewhere, and then transfer then transport the horses again to long term facilities in a third location.

**Public Participation in the Winecup Gamble Horse Sanctuary.** The Winecup Gamble Ranch is currently designing facilities that will provide the opportunity for unprecedented public access to and enjoyment of the wild horses in a historic western ranch environment. The facilities will include a lodge that can be used as a welcoming center and museum dedicated to the history of wild horses and the Winecup Gamble Ranch and overnight accommodations for the public.

**Adoption Program.** The Sanctuary will provide an opportunity to maximize wild horse adoptions because it will provide the public with a very positive environment for interacting with the wild horses and a training program that will increase the number of wild horses that are “halter-broke” and can be handled by people that are not horse professionals.

#### **Other Issues**

The long-term goals of the Winecup Gamble Ranch are to develop its natural resources, including renewable energy, recreation and water, while allowing the Wild Horse Sanctuary to flourish and become a benefit to Elko County, the State of Nevada and the United States. The Ranch is prepared to discuss and address any concerns regarding its proposal.

**Protection of Public Lands.** The major environmental concern that has been expressed is the possible damage caused to public lands by a change from cattle to horses. The Ranch takes the position that this transition will not have detrimental effects for the following reasons:

1. Public lands will be used during the dormant season, which will allow all of the forage to reproduce and reseed throughout the growing season. There will also be less usage of riparian areas, wells and springs during the growing season, which when they are the most vulnerable.
2. Under current operations cattle only use two-thirds of the Ranch and tend to graze more intensively in those areas that are in close proximity to water sources. In contrast, horses will travel three to five times farther to water and will use most of the acreage. Satellite mapping data establishes that the Ranch will support 30% more AUM's than will be used by the horses because of the palatability of the forage for horses, the degree of slope of the terrain and water availability.

3. As stated, the Ranch has agreed with the BLM to a 20% reduction of AUM's in the exchange of species from cattle to horses.
4. The Transitional and Growing Season Divisions can be used to reduce the inventory pressure on public lands in the event of problems caused by fire or drought.

**Wildlife Protection.** Concerns have been expressed about the potential impact of the Proposal on wildlife. Impacts to wildlife will be avoided or mitigated as follows:

1. Wildlife will be able to use the public lands during the growing season without competition from horses or cattle, which will improve reproduction, productivity and habitat.
2. Elk are the dominant wildlife species on the Ranch that would be affected by the change of use. The elk herd has already been taken into consideration by the BLM in the allocation of AUM's. Moreover, the Ranch's internal study indicates that there is sufficient additional forage to support an elk herd many times the current size.
3. The Sanctuary will work with the Nevada Department of Wildlife and advocacy groups in the development of habitat, with emphasis on water development and supplemental feed.
4. Subject to reasonable restrictions, the Sanctuary will be open to visitors, interested parties and hunters, with the exception of irrigated and transitional areas.
5. Ground cover is the most important habitat component for all wildlife on the Ranch. Fire is the greatest threat to this important resource. The Ranch has a volunteer fire department that is trained, equipped and licensed by the United States Forest Service and which will be among the first responders to any fire on the Ranch. In addition, the Ranch uses its own personnel to detect fires during high risk periods.

**Issues Affecting the Public.** The Sanctuary is currently working with a non-profit foundation to address the current and future issues of concern for wild horse advocacy groups, visitors to the Sanctuary, neighbors and residents of Elko County.

1. The Sanctuary will not be used as a short-term holding facility, which will address a major issue of concern for many interested parties who are opposed to the confinement of horses in these facilities. The Ranch will instead provide the opportunity for BLM to move away from the use of short-term confinement facilities to the more natural and humane environment that will be provided by the extensive care of the Transitional Division.

2. One of the most important issues is to contain the horses within the borders of the Sanctuary. The Ranch will maintain a twenty-four hot line to report strayed horses, the use of aerial surveillance and herders to keep the horses on the Ranch. The Ranch will take prompt action to retrieve any estrayed horses. During hunting season the Sanctuary recognizes that there will be added pressure and will make every effort to contain the horses by using additional personnel and paying special attention to the perimeter fences. Moreover, the Ranch intends to train the horses to respond to being called to feed, which will enable Ranch personnel to control the horses.
3. The Ranch is currently designing facilities for a recreational component and to support a true western experience. The facilities will include a lodge that can also be used as a welcoming center and museum, dedicated to the history of the wild horses and the Winecup Gamble Ranch. There will also be overnight accommodations in addition to the lodge and associated facilities for recreational use. During the spring and summer the horses will be locate in the Thousand Springs Valley that runs for fifty miles through the Ranch and is serviced by a county road. This will create a great viewing opportunity for guests of the Ranch and general public, along with the California Trail, old gold mines and the many activities that are planned. Additionally the experience of the Sanctuary might stimulate adoptions.
4. The Sanctuary is aware of the concerns being expressed by advocacy groups and individuals and realizes they need to be addressed. The Sanctuary has made every effort to design facilities and a management plan that benefits the horses, while continuing to lead a natural life style. We are open to comments and suggestions and will consider them very seriously.

**Economics of the Sanctuary:** A frequent question is whether this Sanctuary is being proposed for financial reasons. While the financial aspects of the Sanctuary are important, they are not the only motive for this Proposal. The Sanctuary will negotiate the fees charged for the services provided and expects to recover its direct and indirect costs. Consequently, the conversion of the agricultural assets from cattle to horses is expected to make very little difference in terms of gross income, but it will nonetheless lend itself to the long term goals of the Ranch.

Other economic considerations affecting the BLM, County and State include the following:

1. BLM is planning to remove from 10,000 to 15,000 horses from the Wild Horse Management Areas over the next year and will continue to remove horses from these lands and provide short and long term holding facilities

until the population problem is under control. This approach will continue to create substantial fiscal problems for BLM. The Sanctuary offers a cost effective alternative to the current approach.

2. The existence of the Sanctuary will benefit Elko County through additional tourism, the development of agricultural and recreational resources, and continued support of local businesses. Elko County will also benefit from the fact that the Ranch is not proposing to become a non-profit organization that would adversely affect County tax revenues.
3. With the continued placement of horses in long-term holding facilities in the Midwest, which currently care for over 30,000 horses, are currently receiving all of the financial benefits from this program. The State of Nevada, which has the most wild horses in the country, as well as Elko County, are entitled to the economic benefits that will come from the Wild Horse Sanctuary..

**Conclusion.** The Winecup Gamble Ranch provides an extraordinary opportunity for the creation of a Wild Horse Sanctuary. However, the Ranch will not make transition from cattle to wild horses unless it has long-term agreements that ensure that the Sanctuary will have a minimum of 8,000-10,000 horses for an extended period of time. The Ranch needs to enter into appropriate agreements, or believe that such agreements are imminent, before the Spring of 2010 to allow for the planning and liquidation of the current cattle inventory and the completion of the necessary facilities.