NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has a legal duty to protect native plants and animals, and historic and cultural features and values within the park. While NPWS acknowledges the community and heritage values associated with the wild horse population, it has a responsibility to minimise the impacts of introduced species, including wild horses. The Kosciuszko National Park Draft Wild Horse Management Plan has been developed with stakeholder and community engagement and seeks to address the environmental impacts of the wild horses, while acknowledging their heritage value. The draft plan proposes to protect the unique and sensitive environmental values of the Snowy Mountains landscape, while retaining a small population of wild horses within the park. The draft plan proposes to reduce wild horse numbers through humane and cost effective means.

Each year, Kosciuszko National Park provides thousands of visitors with experiences that are not available anywhere else. Maintaining the balance between protecting the park and facilitating recreation and other park uses is a complex task. The park faces many threats, including pressures from introduced animals and plants that can damage the delicate alpine and sub alpine ecosystems.
Questions and answers

Why does NPWS think wild horses are such a problem and want to reduce their numbers and impacts?

It’s the impact from the current number of wild horses that are the problem.

Introduced animals such as wild horses cause significant ground disturbance, damage to vegetation, riverbeds, streams and natural bogs (from trampling) and compete with native wildlife for food and habitat. These impacts are worsening in Kosciuszko National Park as the wild horse population increases.

NPWS recognises that the presence of wild horses in the park has some tourism, economic and marketing value to the Snowy Mountains region because some people visit the park with the expectation of seeing wild horses in the landscape.

In contrast, many other people visit the region and the park expecting a pristine and native landscape without the intrusion of what they consider to be feral animals. This creates significant challenges for NPWS when trying to resolve or reach a management solution around conflicts between the protection of the park’s natural and cultural values while accounting for community associations with wild horses in the park.

How many wild horses are in the park now?

From aerial survey work there are estimated to be about 6000 wild horses in the park at the moment.

This draft plan outlines how NPWS aims to reduce that number to 3000 in five to ten years’ time and eventually to around 600 in about 20 years’ time.
How will NPWS remove the wild horses?

There are a range of humane and cost effective control methods proposed in the draft plan and the decision to use some or all will be taken to suit particular circumstances using the best available information at the time.

It’s expected that different methods will be selected at different times depending on seasonal factors, location of the horses and population size.

Proposed control methods are:
- trapping and rehoming
- trapping and transport to knackery or abattoir
- trapping then culling at the trap site
- aerial and ground mustering for rehoming
- aerial and ground mustering for transport to knackery or abattoir
- aerial and ground mustering then culling at muster site
- ground shooting
- fertility control (in the longer term when populations are reduced)
- fencing.

Is aerial shooting being or proposed to be used?

No. Aerial shooting is not proposed as a control method within the draft plan. The Independent Technical Reference Group examined and assessed aerial shooting as part of the relative humaneness assessment process for all available control methods and found that it is both a humane and effective control method in certain situations and conditions. The NSW Government has ruled out the use of aerial shooting within the draft plan due to lack of stakeholder acceptance for the control method.

Why is the use of traditional methods of ‘brumby’ running or roping as a control method not proposed within the draft plan?

The Independent Technical Reference Group relative humaneness assessment process of control methods confirmed that the traditional practice of ‘brumby’ running or roping has one of the poorest animal welfare outcomes of the available control methods, as it involves extended pursuit of a wild animal, high risk of injury and oxygen deficit or ‘air hunger’ through choking, placing the animal under prolonged and undue stress. It has been ruled out as an appropriate control method under the draft plan for these reasons.
Why isn’t fertility control being proposed within the draft plan?

Fertility control is proposed for use within the draft plan in the longer term when it is considered to be most effective. The Independent Technical Reference Group found that the techniques only become viable after a reduction in population is achieved and then used to maintain the population at low numbers and densities.

The draft plan proposes that once the overall population has been sufficiently reduced, NPWS adopt an approach of minimal management intervention, incorporating fertility control and small-scale, non-lethal harvesting (trapping, mustering, removal and rehoming). This approach will limit population growth and also reduce or negate the need to apply lethal control methods.

Why can’t the wild horses be re-homed?

They can, and where possible this will continue. As happens now, each year NPWS will put a call out to people and organisations that rehome wild horses and will work with them to supply the number of horses requested.

There are much higher populations of other pests that are doing way more damage than wild horses. Why aren’t you doing something to control them?

In the past five years the NPWS pest control program for Kosciuszko and the Southern Ranges region has resulted in 1844 pigs, 934 deer, 846 goats, 251 cats, 2037 foxes and 1377 wild dogs being removed from reserves across the region (through trapping and shooting programs). NPWS has also laid 43,736 baits for wild dogs, 6734 baits for foxes, 667kg of bait for pigs, 3852kg of bait for rabbits, and ripped or fumigated 2092 rabbit warrens across the same region.

Why can’t NPWS sterilise wild horses as a means of population control?

Permanent sterilisation of individual horses can currently only be achieved with invasive surgical procedures such as gelding for stallions or ovariectomy for mares, both requiring horses to undergo trapping, sedation and general anaesthesia, which is difficult to achieve humanely in a field situation and at a scale for the Kosciuszko National Park wild horse population. Fertility control is therefore only a viable option where horse densities are already low.
Why does NPWS propose to reduce the numbers of wild horses in the park from the estimated 6000 down to approximately 600 horses?

The draft plan proposes to significantly reduce the wild horse population over the next 20 years to lessen the impact that is currently occurring to the environment and other park values and lower the risk to road users.

The smaller the population size the less environmental impact will occur, as well as importantly reducing the ongoing animal welfare implications of having to continue to remove, rehome or cull larger numbers of horses every year if a larger population were permitted. A small population also means less resources and funding are required for long term management, and reduced safety risks such as on high speed roads through the park.

The aim is to reduce the wild horse population to a level where a combination of fertility control and non-lethal harvesting (trapping, mustering and removal from the park) better match community demand for wild horses, therefore reducing or negating the need to apply lethal control methods.

With a population of approximately 600 horses won’t they just die out or be prone to genetic inbreeding or a natural disaster such as bushfires?

Small wild horse populations are successfully retained in other international conservation reserve situations, such as Kaimanawa (300 horses) in New Zealand and Assateague Island (275 horses) in the USA where small wild populations in their hundreds are retained. Herd health is monitored and any genetics issues are addressed through translocation and assisted immigration of new blood stock. The Kosciuszko draft plan proposes that three of four current separate geographic population areas be retained at low wild horse population densities, therefore reducing the risk of exposure to natural disaster.

Will visitors to the Kosciuszko National Park still be able to see and enjoy wild horses at the numbers proposed? By reducing the population aren’t we losing their heritage value?

The draft plan acknowledges the presence of wild horses in the park has tourism, economic and marketing value to the Snowy Mountains region because some people visit the park with the expectation of seeing wild horses in the landscape. In contrast, many other people visit the region and the park expecting a pristine and native landscape without the intrusion of what they consider to be feral animals. This creates significant challenges for NPWS when trying to resolve or reach a solution around conflicts between the protection of natural and cultural values and acknowledging the cultural values of wild horses in the park.

The acknowledgement of the Kosciuszko National Park wild horse population as an ‘attribute’ associated with nationally significant cultural and social values will be achieved by permitting an overall population of approximately 600 wild horses in the longer term. The draft plan proposes zones where horses will still be able to be seen such as areas of Long Plain, Tantangara or at Cascades for example.

Pugging damage to fragile sub alpine peat soils caused by wild horses. Pilot Wilderness Area, Kosciuszko National Park. D. Isaacson/OEH
Have your say

The Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan is open for public comment until 19th August, 2016.

View the plan and supporting documents and/or complete an online submission form available at:

Email your submission on the plan to kosciuszko.wildhorseplan@environment.nsw.gov.au

Post your submission to:
Project Officer
Kosciuszko National Park,
Wild Horse Management Plan Review
National Parks & Wildlife Service,
PO Box 2228 Jindabye NSW 2627

Native stream bank vegetation, Upper Thredbo River, Kosciuszko National Park. D. Isaacson/OEH

Vegetation and streambank damage from wild horses. Ingeegoodbee River, Kosciuszko National Park. D. Isaacson/OEH