



NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

Amending the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan

Fact sheet



Kosciuszko National Park is a globally important place

Kosciuszko National Park is the largest national park in New South Wales and a place of global significance. It contains Australia's highest mountains, unique glacial landscapes, plant and animal species found nowhere else in the world, and a diversity of threatened species. The park also encompasses significant water catchments in the headwaters of the Murray River system and globally significant wetlands.

The park contains over 1,000 Aboriginal heritage sites and is culturally important to Aboriginal people as part of a broader Aboriginal cultural landscape. It also has many items and places of cultural significance associated with Australia's pioneering and pastoral heritage.

These special values and attributes are recognised by the park's inclusion in the National Heritage Listing for the Australian Alps, the listing of parts of the park as internationally significant wetlands under the Ramsar Convention, and the declaration of assets of intergenerational significance within the park under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NSW).

The impact of wild horses on the park is increasing

Wild horses are severely impacting the natural and cultural values of Kosciuszko National Park. They damage native vegetation by trampling and grazing, change the structure and composition of vegetation communities, cause soil erosion and compaction, disperse weed seeds, reduce water quality in streams and wetlands, and compete with native animals for food and resources.

In 2018, the NSW Scientific Committee determined habitat degradation and loss by feral horses as a key threatening process, identifying more than 30 adversely affected New South Wales and Commonwealth-listed threatened species and communities, including the broad-toothed rat, the northern corroboree frog, the alpine she-oak skink and several plant species. The Australian Government's Threatened Species Scientific Committee advises that feral horses may be the crucial factor causing the extinction of some nationally listed threatened species.

Wild horses also damage Aboriginal cultural heritage and historic heritage and are involved in many negative interactions with park visitors, including vehicle strikes and aggressive wild horses in and around campgrounds.

Current control methods will not reduce the population

The National Parks and Wildlife Service conducts regular surveys to estimate the number of wild horses in Kosciuszko National Park. Surveys are conducted in accordance with the best available science and are peer-reviewed.

The population of wild horses at the time of the most recent survey (November 2022) was assessed to be 18,814, with a 95% confidence interval of 14,501 to 23,535.

The current Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan adopted under the *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018* imposes a legal obligation on the Secretary of the Department of Planning and Environment, which will be given effect by National Parks and Wildlife Service, to reduce the wild horse population to 3,000 horses by 30 June 2027.

Despite significant efforts by National Parks and Wildlife Service to increase the rate of wild horse removal since the plan was adopted in 2021, the control methods provided for in the current plan will not enable the target population of 3,000 wild horses to be reached by the 30 June 2027 deadline. Control methods such as trapping and rehoming, removal to a knackery, and ground shooting are limited by several factors, including the size and terrain of the park, the mobility and distribution of wild horses, and a limited number of people willing and capable of rehoming wild horses.

On current trends, using the control methods approved under the current plan, it is estimated that the population of wild horses by 30 June 2027 will still be more than 12,000. With only the same methods in use, it is likely the population will not be reduced to 3,000 until 2030–31.

Aerial shooting will enable the target to be reached

It is proposed that the plan be amended to authorise aerial shooting as one of the available control methods, alongside existing methods such as trapping and rehoming, and ground shooting.

The ability to conduct aerial shooting is essential if the population is to be reduced to 3,000 wild horses by 30 June 2027, which is a legal obligation under the Act and the plan.

The proposed amendment does not change the requirement to retain 3,000 wild horses in the park.

Aerial shooting of wild horses would be carried out to the highest welfare standards, including a standard operating procedure informed by independent advice and which involves ongoing auditing by animal welfare experts.

Aerial shooting carried out by skilled, highly trained shooters under appropriate operating protocols delivers animal welfare outcomes that are comparable to or better than other control methods such as trapping or mustering, transport to a knackery, or shooting in trap yards. Aerial shooting ensures a faster time to death for wild horses. It avoids the stress, anxiety and risk of injury involved, for example, in trapping and transporting horses.

The advantages of aerial shooting are:

- it would enable the existing legal obligation to reduce the population of wild horses to 3,000 horses by 30 June 2027 to be met
- it achieves the population target within the required timeframe and will deliver significant benefits for the environment and cultural heritage, reducing the extent of damage caused by wild horses and lowering the risk of extinction for several threatened species; this is compared to using currently authorised methods only, which will not reduce the wild horse population to 3,000 until 2030–31
- best practice aerial shooting would deliver animal welfare outcomes comparable to or better than other available control methods
- fewer wild horses would be killed overall because the population would be reduced within the required timeframe (June 2027) rather than being drawn out for several more years while population growth continues; it is estimated the use of aerial shooting would result in approximately 8,000 fewer wild horses being killed to achieve and then maintain the target population of 3,000
- the risks posed by wild horses to visitors in the park would be reduced, including in high visitation campgrounds, walking tracks and on roads.

The next survey of the wild horse population in the park will be carried out before the end of 2023. An updated population estimate based on that survey will inform future planning for wild horse control, including approved aerial shooting operations.

Carcass management

The government recognises carcass management is a key concern for the community and has asked National Parks and Wildlife Service to implement a carcass management plan. This aims to minimise environmental, aesthetic and public recreation risks from the presence of carcasses, particularly in high visitation areas.

Regardless of control methods, carcasses will not be left in major waterways. To the greatest extent practicable, carcasses will not be left within 400 metres of busy visitor areas such as campgrounds.

Some carcasses will be left to decompose in place and not moved or collected. This is standard practice for feral animal control on public and private land and is consistent with the longstanding practice in the park with deer and pig control. Carcasses are likely to decompose in approximately 4 weeks over the summer. Decomposition is slower in winter.

National Parks and Wildlife Service will also implement enhanced and targeted control of pigs and wild dogs to ensure the temporary availability of carcasses does not increase pigs or dogs.

Public safety

If aerial shooting of wild horses is introduced, rigorous protocols would be in place to ensure public safety. Specific plans would be implemented to protect the public and ensure visitor and neighbour safety. That would include notifications and closures of areas to public access while operations are under way.

Resort precincts would not be closed because wild horse control would not be conducted in those areas.

Maintaining the target population

Once the population target of 3,000 is reached, ongoing wild horse control will maintain the population at that size and in the existing wild horse retention areas identified in the current plan.

A trial of reproductive control options in selected park areas will commence when the overall population is reduced to 3,000 wild horses.

What changes are proposed to the plan?

Six amendments are proposed to the Kosciuszko National Park Wild Horse Heritage Management Plan.

- Amendments 1 and 2 are minor adjustments to information in the plan about consultation, that will be included to take account of the current amendment process.
- Amendment 3 is a factual update of the estimated wild horse population to reflect the published 2022 survey outcomes.
- Amendment 4 is to include reference to the existing adopted national standard for aerial shooting of wild horses.
- Amendment 5 will include aerial shooting in the list of available control methods in the plan.
- Amendment 6 provides minor updates to reflect that the Wild Horse Community Advisory Panel has been appointed since the plan was adopted in 2021 and to include relevant updated sources in the reference list.

For more information or to have your say visit environment.nsw.gov.au/wildhorses



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