

Wild Horses and Burros Transition Paper

Issue

Wild horses and burro (WHBs) populations on public lands in the West are out of control. They are doubling in numbers every four to five years and are having serious impacts on the health of the land, wildlife, other land uses. Every year more and more horses are suffering death by starvation and dehydration. According to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), excess horses gathered and placed in holding facilities have become a **\$1 billion obligation** for their lifetime care. Administration and Congressional limitations have favored "horse advocates" thereby creating an impossible management situation.

Facts

In 1971, Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (WFRHBA), that declares "wild free-roaming horses and burros [as] living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West," to be managed as "components of the public lands," in a "manner that is designed to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance."

Budget: FY 2015 \$77.2 million
 \$49.4 (66%) of the FY 2015 budget spent for off-range holding facilities
FY 2016 \$80.6 million
FY 2017 \$80.1 Requested

BLM estimates 67,027 wild horses and burros roam across 10 western states as of March 2016. This population estimate exceeds the ecologically based appropriate management level (AML) of 26,715 animals. More than 40,000 excess animals are currently on BLM rangelands (149% over capacity).

3,000 – 5,000 WHBs are removed from the range annually based upon available budget, holding facility space, and anticipated adoptions. There are nearly 48,000 WHBs in off-range pastures and corrals with a per animal life-time cost of nearly \$50,000. Most gather, and other management activities have been litigated by "horse advocates."

These management actions are not effective in reducing population growth. Population projections:

2020 = 112,000 animals on range
2024 = 198,000 animals on range
2028 = 366,000 animals on range

Summary of the Current BLM Management Model

1. Set on-range WHB appropriate management levels (AML) based on multiple use rangelands and ecological thresholds.
2. Identify Herd Management Areas (HMAs) that exceed population thresholds and where overuse and range deterioration is occurring.

3. Remove excess WHBs. **Problem:** there are more excess WHBs than BLM presently has budget capability to remove.
4. Adopt out WHBs that have been gathered. **Problem:** There is adoption demand for fewer than 3,500 WHBs per year; far less than population increases.

The model has been ineffective because over the years more WHBs have been gathered than could be adopted. The increasing excess of WHBs (48,000) have been placed in holding facilities. The majority (66%) of the budget is dedicated to housing animals in holding facilities. With limited ability to gather WHBs or to expand holding facilities, the WHBs are allowed to increase numbers exponentially on the range.

Fertility control as a means of controlling populations presently involves the use of the drug PZP. Effective use requires administration of the drug, followed by a booster 30 - 60 days later, and followed by an annual dose to prevent a mare from foaling two years after the last dose. *Gathering costs and logistics render PZP ineffective.* Studies are underway to develop a long-term fertility control drug; however, none are expected to be available for at least five years.

The efficacy of different sterilization methods was to be studied by Oregon State University under a contract with BLM. That study was litigated in 2016 with BLM subsequently making a decision not to award just before the contract was to be initiated. Failure to award the contract has potentially removed one of the best means for future management of WHB populations.

Appropriation language effectively amends the original horse legislation by placing a prohibition on the euthanasia of healthy WHBs and the sale, without limitation, of WHBs.

Discussion

Health of the public's rangelands should be prioritized above all other considerations. Healthy rangelands are where native wildlife can thrive, livestock can graze to support local communities, free-ranging horses and burros can live healthy lives, and water quality can be sustained.

In six years, with the absence of a significant change in Administration and Congressional policy, WHB populations on the range will number nearly 165,000; more than six times appropriate management level. Increasingly large acreage of healthy rangelands will be destroyed beyond natural recovery with the resultant loss of most forms of wildlife, a prevalence of WHBs in inhumane condition, and loss of many family operated ranches. The negative impacts of unhealthy land reaches hunters, fishermen and others who enjoy the variety of recreational opportunities that properly managed lands provide.

Removal of livestock is not an answer to the WHB overpopulation problem. There are numerous areas where permitted livestock have not been turned out on federal ranges due to the lack of forage from excess horses. The numbers of excess horses continue to grow annually, and with this increase in excess horses the land continues to decline to an increasingly worse condition.

All forms of large animals are managed by harvesting as means of keeping their numbers in concert with available feed. This includes not only cattle and sheep raised for food, clothing and other uses, but also deer, elk, antelope, bison and many others.

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the Grand Canyon National Game Preserve to "showcase" the Kaibab deer herd, considered the Nation's finest. In order to respond to popular sentiment and to increase deer numbers, hunting was eliminated and natural predators were nearly eliminated. The population exploded from an estimated 3,000 deer in 1906 to as many as 100,000 in 1923. The deer herd vastly exceeded the carrying capacity of the habitat. Measures to reduce the herd were too little, too late. Thousands of deer starved and froze to death winter after winter. The nation's "showcase" was left in shambles.

Reports on the case document that wildlife populations will continue to increase after causing habitat devastation before the populations will implode and starve. This classic case triggered the revision of big game management guidelines throughout the wildlife profession, and the lessons influence management today. The Bambi Syndrome played into the dynamics of the case and fueled the public overprotection sentiment. Today's WHB situation mirrors the Kaibab.

WHB numbers on the range need to be brought down to appropriate management levels (AML) where their numbers can be managed to prevent reproduction from exceeding adoption demand. By the time these levels are reached, fertility control options may be available. The need to gather and warehouse large numbers of WHBs in unnatural and expensive holding facilities could become a thing of the past.

The Administration and the Congress are faced with several options.

1. Status quo. That is, continue the current program allowing increasing numbers of WHBs on the range; the destruction of land and related economic impacts; and, spending in excess of \$50 million per year, for the foreseeable future, warehousing animals pending an ecological collapse involving large numbers of WHB deaths by starvation and/or dehydration.
2. Stop the negative impact on the land by appropriating a significant increase in funds to remove WHBs to get to AML and to increase the number of contracts to warehouse the animals for the remainder of their natural life; a multi-billion-dollar commitment. It is noteworthy that, typically, horses live an additional ten years that are removed from public rangelands and placed on Midwestern pastures.
3. Direct the BLM to use the provisions of the WHB Act that provide management options designed to have numbers in concert with the provisions and requirements of the Act. The budget impact would be relatively small if there were provisions for receipts from the sale of excess unadoptable WHBs, and savings from reduced warehousing costs to be redirected to gathers designed to reach AML. This option would be consistent with the September, 2016, National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board recommendation that un-adopted WHBs be sold without limitation and those unsuited for sale be euthanized. When HMAs are reduced to AML, initiate management that will sustain the herds and prevent the population from exceeding AML again.

Recommendations

Population Control

1. Adopt the WHB Advisory Board's recommendation to sell un-adopted WHBs.
2. Seek Congressional authority to redirect receipts from the sale of WHBs and the savings from reduced levels of warehousing WHBs to gathers intended to bring animals to AML.
3. Support development and use of long-term fertility control drugs and pursue research directed at determining a humane and workable sterilization procedure for WHBs.
4. After herds are at AML, implement The Selective Removal Management Model to sustain the herds:
 - a) Leave base herds on the range to live out their lives.
 - b) Sustain herds by regularly removing excess reproduction from only young adoptable animals.
 - c) Assure that an adequate number of quality, young animals remain in the herd for herd viability and genetic diversity.
 - d) Use fertility control options as needed to prevent excess reproduction from exceeding adoption demand.

Removal of the excess animals and application of this model will give the agency a powerful Strategy to persuade the OMB and Congress that wild horse herds will never again increase above AML. Long-term holding will be eliminated because unadoptable animals will not be removed from the herds and warehoused. Short term holding will only be needed for pre-adoption purposes. When the model is finally implemented, the non-restricted sale authority will no longer be needed.

Reference Attachment A for background on the Selective Removal Management Model.

Reference Attachment B for Supplemental Actions that would likely appeal to the public, including other considerations.

Contacts:

C. Rex Cleary, Senior Resource Specialist
775-883-1600
775-846-3381 cell

John McLain, Principal Resource Specialist
775-883-1600; 775-742-8603 cell

Attachment A

Background on the Selective Removal Management Model

The Selective Removal Management Model was designed, tested, and implemented in the old Susanville BLM District. The experimentation was authorized by BLM as a task of the Modoc Washoe Experimental Stewardship Program (MWESP) located in the Surprise Resource Area and headquartered in Cedarville, California. At the outset, the ESP Steering Committee established the objective to eliminate the necessity for warehousing animals. The warehousing was viewed as a pitfall that could ultimately get out of control. After design, testing, and refinement in the Resource Area, the model was implemented throughout the District. The experiment was conducted from the mid 1980s into the 1990s. It was a success and the District was no longer shipping animals to warehousing. Note that there is an absolute requirement for the herds to be reduced to AML before starting the Model. Failure to be down to AML before starting the model will insure model failure.

Today there is scarcely a trace of the ESP experiment because the Susanville District was struck by a Perfect Storm. The District was abolished by reorganization. About the same time, the key participants in the wild horse program all retired or transferred in a relatively short time. And, a court ordered moratorium concerning AML legitimacy stopped all BLM gathering for a few years. By the time gathering started again, the Susanville herds had grown beyond recognition and no one on staff knew how, or cared about starting the ESP Models over again. However, there are five retired key participants in the experimentation that still possess full knowledge of application of the Model. They are available for consultation. The contact for all of them is Lee Delaney, former Surprise Area Manager, and former Chief, National BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program. Lee Delaney resides in Redding, California, Ph- 530-241-8966.

The Susanville District had its own gathering crew and, in addition to gathering, the crew conducted mobile adoptions throughout California to find homes for the adoptable animals removed from the District herds. Fairgrounds in California were found to be excellent targets for conducting adoptions. Communities came to anticipating the annual events and received them with open arms. Mobile adoptions are recommended throughout the U.S. They tap a demand that emerges when the adoptions are close at hand. This demand has not been fully exploited by BLM.

ATTACHMENT B

Supplemental Actions That Would Appeal to The Public

Wild Horse and Burro National Sanctuaries

The American public are both interested and concerned that the wild horse and burro population are well managed and cared for on the public lands within designated herd management areas (HMA). However, access to the HMAs is very difficult or nearly impossible for the public to access, due to the remote and scattered nature of the HMAs across vast expanses of rangelands with unpaved and often unmarked unimproved roads. Therefore, the public is not able to view the wild horses and therefore depends on the BLM, horse advocate groups, and filmmakers to provide ongoing information and viewing media reporting on the wild horses in their native environment.

Recommendation:

The BLM should conduct a study of HMAs situated along Interstate 80 in Nevada to determine a suitable location to establish a National Wild Horse Sanctuary that would provide well identified off ramp access for the public to become educated on the wild horses, their range and management. The sanctuary would consist of the following:

- Visitor center with educational and interpretive information regarding the wild horses and their management (i.e. film of gathers, processing, adoptions, etc.).
- Improved road extending through the HMA and map handouts that assist the visitor locate viewing sites to observe and photograph the horses in their native environment.
- Bus tours could also be scheduled with BLM specialists to provide group orientation and education.
- Provide for public viewing of the processing area with corrals, chutes, feed storage, etc.
- Hand out comment cards and encourage the visitors to provide comments on the Sanctuary facility management of the wild horses, and suggestions for improved management going forward. This information can be gathered and utilized in defending existing management, and to improve future management of the wild horses over time.
- The State of Nevada could be encouraged to become a partner in the National Wild Horse Sanctuary to help promote state tourism.
- Adoptions could also occur periodically at the Sanctuary which would enhance exposure and publicity for the wild horses and the program.
- The Sanctuary would be an excellent area for ongoing research regarding rangeland management under year around wild horse use to achieve a "thriving natural ecological balance", carry out fertility control, and other.

If determined to be equally important, the opportunity also exists to establish a sanctuary for wild burros in several locations in the West.

National Wild Horse Public Relations Program

The BLM has carried out an inadequate public information/education program as it relates to wild horses, their management, and the all-important horse adoption program. This is not surprising given that federal agencies are not typically tasked with, nor equipped to conduct public education programs nationally, particularly for a program such as the WHBs program that experiences such interest, passion, emotion, and sensitivity from multiple groups nationally. This inability to develop and convey a strong wild horse educational program nationally has contributed to the dilemma the BLM now find themselves facing.

Recommendation:

- BLM conduct a search for a nationally recognized public relations firm with the ability to create effective wild horse information media presentations, and schedule for showings on educational television (i.e. PBS), in elementary schools and other.
- BLM should have a budget component that allocates adequate funding to contract for an ongoing wild horse information and education program nationally.
- The wild horse and burro adoption program should be the centerpiece of the national wild horse and burro information program to encourage adoptions and reduce cost of warehousing animals.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Expanded Wild Horse Fertility Control Research

Contraception attempts have been a long term, costly, and mostly ineffective challenge for BLM, despite ongoing research by selected institutions. Approaches have included gathering mares and installing either boluses with a time release fertility control drug, or needle injections of the PZP drug either at time of gather, or by use of marksmen who stalk the mares and apply the drug by drug injection darts. Neither the drugs, nor the present application process, are working as effectively as desired, and public response to these approaches are often less than supportive. An expanded approach to fertility control is needed that either eliminates or reduces the need for gathers to apply selected fertility drugs.

Recommendation:

- Equine nutritionists at a western university, had in the recent past, indicated that a targeted fertility control mineral block could potentially be developed.
- If successful, the fertility control blocks could be carefully placed by the wild horse specialist and the herd allowed free choice access to this orally applied drug.

- BLM should explore this opportunity with institutions conducting equine research. If successful, this approach could revolutionize the wild horse population management opportunities throughout the HMAs while greatly reducing the need for frequent costly gathers.

Expanded Prison Inmate Wild Horse Gentling Program

The BLM has worked with selected state prisons that have the facilities to house and care for small numbers of selected young wild horses for selected inmates to gentle, saddle train, and advance the training to a stage where the colts can be shown at auction. The program has produced horses, when shown under saddle at auction, have brought significant sale prices. Many individuals are especially interested in acquiring wild horses that are already started to the point where they are gentle broke and can be rode.

Recommendation:

- BLM should explore opportunities with additional state prisons having the necessary facilities to ascertain interest in establishing similar programs to those already successfully underway.
- Costs associated with an expanded program would need to be carefully evaluated to assure that the benefits to the WHBs program, including public interest and support, are sufficient to continue or expand this program.