Advocating for commonsense, ecologically-sound approaches to managing horses and burros to promote healthy wildlife and rangelands for future generations

Rangeland Ecosystem

Wild Horse and Burro Facts

- BLM rangelands can support <27,000 horses and burros.
- There are currently >72,000 horses and burros on BLM ranges.
- Horse populations double every 4 years.
- There are >46,000 horses and burros in BLM off-range holding facilities.
- Taxpayers pay about $50 million per year to care for horses and burros in holding.

Overpopulation of horses and burros on rangeland ecosystems can lead to several negative impacts, including the spread of invasive species, water contamination, and desertification.

Horses and burros damage landscapes by trampling vegetation, compacting soil, and over-grazing forage plants. Areas inhabited by horses and burros tend to have fewer plant species, less vegetative cover, and an increased susceptibility to invasive plant species – which can have ecosystem-wide implications.

Species that may be affected by excess wild horses and burros:

- Greater Sage-Grouse
  
  (Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

- Bighorn Sheep
  
  (Credit: Jon Sullivan)

- Reptiles and Mammals
  
  (Credit: Seney Natural History Assoc)
Appropriate management levels (AML) are based on the amount of forage resource available in an area, with regard to multiple land uses.

What about cattle grazing?
To prevent overgrazing, BLM bases livestock permits on available forage. Since 1954, authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed lands has declined by over 50%. Meanwhile, horse and burro populations on BLM lands are now two-and-a-half times greater than AML.

Effects on water quality and riparian areas:
Root systems break up and aerate soil, allowing rain water to penetrate. When horses and burros deplete vegetation and remove roots, erosion and soil temperatures increase. This can lead to a shift in plant and animal communities (Osterman-Kelm 2009).

Nutritional Requirements:
Horses consume up to 1.25 times the amount of forage as a cow of equivalent mass.

Hooves: Round toes, unlike other ungulates on the range, allow them to paw vegetation out by the roots, killing the entire plant.

Mouth: Have both upper and lower front incisors and flexible lips, allowing horses to crop vegetation closer to the ground than other ungulates.

Horses have physiological attributes that are unique for rangeland ungulates, leading to greater ecosystem damage (Mernard 2002).

In studies where horses and burros were excluded from plots of land, exclusion areas had higher plant density and diversity than horse-grazed areas. The more heavily vegetated area behind the fence is a horse exclusion plot (Beever 2000).