



## NATIONAL HORSE & BURRO RANGELAND MANAGEMENT COALITION

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)



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

**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

(Photo Credit: BLM)

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

## 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).

**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.**



(Photo Credit: Callie Hendrickson)

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).

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Masters of Foxhounds Association • Mule Deer Foundation • National Association of Conservation Districts  
National Association of Counties • National Association of State Departments of Agriculture  
National Cattlemen's Beef Association • National Rifle Association • National Wildlife Refuge Association  
Public Lands Council • Public Lands Foundation • Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation • Safari Club International  
Society for Range Management • The Wildlife Society • Wild Sheep Foundation