



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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Horse and Burro Coalition Statement on National Academy of Sciences Report

Washington, DC (June 7, 2013) – The National Horse & Burro Rangeland Management Coalition (“the Coalition”) issues the following statement in response to the National Academies of Sciences National Research Council (NRC) report released this week, entitled: “Using Science to Improve the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program: A Way Forward.” This statement may be used to correct some of the misinformation put forth by several nongovernmental organizations and media outlets immediately following the report’s release.

The Coalition applauds the NRC for stressing the importance of sound science in addressing the ongoing problem of management of wild horses and burros (WHB) on western public lands. Further, the study shines a spotlight on a fact that has gone too long unrecognized – that, in part due to constraints outside the control of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), current policies are not sustainable and can sometimes even be detrimental to the animals and the rangeland ecosystem that BLM is statutorily mandated to protect.

The Coalition also agrees with the report’s primary message – that horses require active and continued management to ensure ecological balance to sustain healthy populations and the habitats on which they depend– correct. The BLM should next consider how best to move forward with population control methods, adequate range health evaluations, and public engagement within the confines of existing law.

With regards to WHB management, we agree that the report’s statement that “when public participation is shaped and monitored by the analytic-deliberative process, public understanding and confidence in the scientific analysis can be improved and conflict over values can be mitigated.” Without public understanding, we cannot expect to see improvements in current management which, as referenced in the report, is “not sustainable.”

The Coalition also finds instructive some of the more technical aspects of the report, including:

- *“A large body of scientific literature...suggests that the proportion of animals missed on surveys ranges from 10 to 50 percent.”* We believe BLM should take this opportunity to inform the public of new evidence indicating that the current WHB population is likely much higher than 30,000 (the commonly-used estimate), and that “most free-ranging horse populations managed by BLM are probably growing at 15-20 percent a year” even as BLM gathers continue.
- *“The primary way that equid populations self-limit is through increased competition for forage at higher densities, which results in smaller quantities of forage available per*

animal, poorer body condition, and decreased natality and survival.” Because horses are non-native species with no natural predators, if active management is not practiced, their populations are only controlled by the hard, cold realities of starvation when population levels grow too high. These same realities have devastating impacts on native wildlife and other multiple uses that depend on the resources on BLM HMAs. Allowing such untethered growth would be unlawful. BLM is required to manage at “appropriate management level” (AML), which is a measure of ecological balance with other wildlife and multiple uses—not a determination of the land’s maximum carrying capacity for horses alone. BLM is required to manage for healthy horses and healthy rangelands, which can only be done by actively controlling horse population sizes.

- *“Research on effective methods of fertility control remains important to the BLM because fertility control is the major alternative to gathering and removing horses that is generally accepted by the public.”* In order to provide active management, BLM should continue vigorously exploring new and existing fertility control treatments; use of sex ratio adjustments and spaying; and introduction of sterile herds.
- *“The Wild Horses and Burros Management Handbook lacks the specificity necessary to guide managers adequately in establishing and adjusting appropriate management levels.”* We agree that monitoring and assessment guidelines are lacking, which in many cases is allowing for rangeland degradation by WHB herds. BLM should implement prescriptive policy and provide clarity to ambiguous terms such as “thriving natural ecological balance” and “rangeland condition.”
- *How AMLs are established, monitored, and adjusted is not transparent to stakeholders, supported by scientific information, or amenable to adaptation with new information and environmental and social change.”* This is a prime opportunity for BLM to take a look at how it determines AML and whether its current standards are adequate to reach ecological balance. Sound rangeland science should be at the foundation of AML, and this determination should be made known to the public.
- *BLM should foster “Principles of transparency and community-based public participation and engagement in decision-making.”* Input from local stakeholders is crucial. The people on the ground are closest to these horses and most affected by their impacts on natural resources, which are critical to the vitality of local communities.

The Coalition appreciates the extensive efforts of the NRC to review the BLM WHB Management Program. While we are still in the process of reviewing the NRC’s extensive contributions, we believe the report provides findings, analysis and recommendations that the BLM can and should use to improve its WHB program.

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The Coalition is a diverse partnership of 13 wildlife, conservation and sportsmen organizations, industry partners, and professional natural-resource scientific societies working together to identify proactive and comprehensive solutions to increase effective management of horse and burro populations and mitigate the adverse impacts to healthy native fish, wildlife, and plants and the ecosystems on which they depend. For more information, visit www.wildhorserange.org.

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