



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

GET THE FACTS: “Free-Roaming” Horses and Burros in America

In the late 1500s, Spanish explorers introduced domestic horses to North America.⁶ Over time, some of those domesticated horses escaped or were released, creating a population of reproductive feral horses in North America. Because these horses have ancestors that were once domesticated but are now free-roaming in the absence of human care, they are considered feral and not “wild”.³ Wild animals are those with ancestors that have never been domesticated.³

Although many horse species evolved in North America, these species went extinct approximately 11,400 years ago during the Pleistocene era.² Therefore, the modern “free-roaming” horses of America are descendants of horses that were domesticated in Eurasia and subjected to many generations of selective breeding, and are not native.^{4,6}



Horses pose as competition for native Rocky mountain elk (*Cervus canadensis*) at watering holes as seen by this series of photos taken by a trail camera in the Sawhawe Mountains, NV. (Credit: Mark Freese, NDOW)

These government facilities operate at a cost of roughly \$43 million annually.⁵ Current management practices are severely restricted by popular opinion, which has failed to consider the devastating impact of horses and burros on native species and natural ecosystems or the substantial and growing cost to American taxpayers. For more information on current BLM horse and burro management policies and associated costs, visit the BLM’s [National Horse and Burro Program](#) website.

action taken by BLM. In cases where horses are gathered and removed, they are prepared for adoption or sent to temporary or permanent enclosed pastures managed by BLM. This type of rangeland management is different from management of wildlife, which can be controlled by hunters, inter- and intra-specific competition, and natural predators, and different from livestock management, which manages impacts through controlled grazing permits.

Horse Management

Management of horses was given to BLM in 1971 through the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. BLM manages these animals with the goal of maintaining healthy wild horse and burro populations on healthy public lands. To do this, BLM works to achieve the Appropriate Management Level (AML) for each Herd Management Area (HMA). To determine the AML, BLM evaluates several years of rangeland resource (vegetation, soil, and water quality) and population data using the best available science and technology. If an AML is exceeded, BLM is responsible for protecting the resources by gathering and removing the excess animals from the range. However, many HMAs consistently exceed AML with no



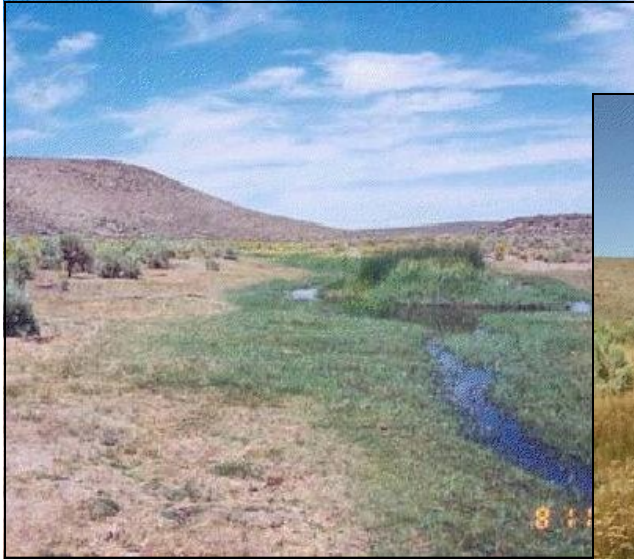
Skinny Mare (Credit: Anonymous)

An Expanding Population

Horse and burro herds currently range across 31.6 million acres, an area about the size of Massachusetts and New Jersey combined.⁵ Due to high reproduction rates, long lifespan, federal protection, and a lack of natural predators, horse and burro herds can double in size about every four years. In recent decades, the population of horses and burros on public Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands has soared from an estimated 17,300 to 25,000 in 1971 to more than 84,000 in 2012.⁵ About 37,300 horses roam freely on public land, while 46,500 are maintained in government-run corrals and pastures.

Negative Impacts

Horses damage landscapes directly by trampling vegetation, hardpacking the soil, and over-grazing. Horse grazing also leads to indirect damage by reducing the amount of precipitation that can penetrate the soil, increasing erosion, and increasing soil temperatures which leads to a shift in plant and animal communities.¹ Areas inhabited by horses tend to have fewer plant species, less shrub cover, lower occurrence of native grasses, and more invasive plants, which can have negative impacts on the entire ecosystem.¹ Many small reptiles and mammals that depend on burrows and brush cover to survive and breed are less abundant in horse-occupied sites. In particular, species that have specific habitat requirements are more at risk, such as western whiptails and ant species that are important seed dispersers and scavengers.¹ These ecosystem-wide effects are of particular concern for sagebrush dependent species, including the greater sage-grouse¹, which is a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Feral herds are not monitored or managed as are livestock. That means that when horses are added to an ecosystem, little habitat is left undisturbed, and more species may be impacted.



Sheldon NWR Big Spring Creek before and after horse gather (August 2004 to August 2005). (Credit: Dave Johnson)



The Future of Horse Management

The number of animals removed from the range now far outnumbers the number adopted or sold as demand for horses and burros dwindled in recent years. Research is being conducted to determine the effectiveness of fertility control as a management tool for the future. BLM and the Department of the Interior must work with wildlife professionals and others to develop a plan to manage horses and burros in an ecologically responsible manner, because American rangelands cannot continue to sustain ever-expanding populations of “wild” horses and burros.

Citations

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Contact us at horseandrange@gmail.com or visit us on the web at wildhorserange.org