

The Horse Rustlers

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Below is a story that is old only in date. Still today numbers don't match, and horses don't arrive where there suppose to. When the BLM collects horses eyes see them collect and leave and even under watchful eyes they still disappear according to the numbers. It's the shell game and we as tax payers pay for so that cattlemen can profit off of tax payer land. Once they are rounded up and removed they are NOT branded at that point. Federal horses are NOT branded until they arrive at a federal facility and given shots and inspected. On the road they are no different than anyone horse to eye. This is how they can drive off with truck loads of horses and get away with it. These horses need to be branded on the spot before they are remove from any federal lands or transported.

The horse rustlers: how scam artists abuse a federal adoption program for wild horses - Cover Story Wendy Williams

How scam artists abuse a federal adoption program for wild horses.

One hot afternoon in August, back in 1992, agent Steve Sederwall of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) finished his lunch and turned the wheels of his red pickup truck west onto I-10 out of Las Cruces, New Mexico. He was headed for the state prison's mustang-gentling project, looking for 36 head of stolen horses.

"Misdirected" was what a few people might call them, but Sederwall figured what most people would call them was plain "stolen." After all, he thought, these days, when you work for the government, the name you give something appears to be pretty flexible.

He arrived too late. The stock truck with the government mustangs had pulled out an hour earlier. The horses were headed for a ranch in West Texas, and eventually for the slaughterhouse at Fort Worth. Or so an informant had told Sederwall.

Worth about \$500 a head, give or take \$100 here or there, the purloined herd might net around \$18,000 at the killer's. Sederwall figured that was a nice chunk of change for a couple days' effort. Driving back from the prison, he thought about that easy money, and this started him wondering if he might be in the wrong line of work.

The next day, Sederwall put on his cowboy hat, drove to Texas, and picked up a Texas Ranger. Undercover as horse buyers, they showed up at the ranch near Fort Stockton and saw the stock truck and the penned-up government horses. When a fellow came out of the ranch house, Sederwall asked to buy the horses. Nope, the wrangler said. Sederwall remembers the wrangler adding, "Those horses aren't for sale. We're going to breed some and sell the others to the killer's."

Sederwall was enraged. It wasn't the first time he'd heard these stories. The plot usually went this way: wild horses, protected by the BLM under the 1971 Wild Horse and Burro Act, are rounded up from public land in 10 western states, funneled through the national horse adoption program, and sold for commercial uses. Somebody's pockets get lined--probably more than one person's. No questions asked.

He began to think that the problem might amount to more than just the BLM looking the other way--that agency employees were actually encouraging traders to take the animals. The goal: get them off the range that cattlemen were clamoring to use. From time to time, Sederwall suspected, BLM employees were doing the selling themselves, pocketing that \$500 per horse.

"I quickly discovered that their goal was to get rid of the horses and that the law didn't weigh into it. It was, get rid of the horses at all costs," he says. "The BLM--they had too many of those horses on the range. They're mandated to take care of the animals. They got ranchers yelling at them. They're caught in the middle. And when I say at all costs--you're paying. It costs anywhere from \$1,500 to \$2,500 to bring those animals in. If all we care about's the money, if ever'body just wants their money, why don't we just shoot the damn things, give the bad guys \$500 a horse, and save the government \$1,000 or \$1,500 a horse?"

That \$18,000 profit on stolen mustangs was small change, he realized. Plenty of other deals went down that netted several hundred thousand bucks a shot. One was rumored at close to half a million. He and several other BLM agents down in New Mexico were pretty upset.

One of those was Dale Tunnell, special agent in charge of the BLM's division of law enforcement in Santa Fe--Sederwall's boss. Tunnell was the man who had brought Sederwall into the BLM, enticing him away from his job with another agency as an undercover drug cop.

"I had agents," says Tunnell, "that I'd sent to Oklahoma on some wild-horse cases who had determined that there was a lot of cover-up and falsification of reports--some pretty dirty dealings. I got my first taste of how BLM handles their internal problems. They went so far as to try to smear the reputation of the agent who worked the case. They did everything they could to stop him from completing his investigation."

Sederwall, Tunnell, and the others got a U.S. attorney over in West Texas to call a grand jury. Jurors were sworn in. Subpoenas were issued, some to BLM officials. The officials never showed. The Justice Department just stopped pushing the case. The grand jury expired. Says Tunnell, "In an investigation that lasted 14 months, with 15 agents involved, with 3,000 pieces of documents identifying the corruption and fraud, at no level did we ever get to a grand jury and provide evidence."

Tunnell, who, like Sederwall, has since left the BLM, has nothing but scorn for his former employer. In particular, he says, the idea that government employees who have daily interactions with cattlemen will protect the interests of the wild-horse herds is absolutely absurd. When it comes to rustling government mustangs, the greed would have made a drug lord blush, say the agents, who claim to have solid evidence, including tapes of informants saying that BLM employees were taking money.

"It's pretty much a joke how the entire horse program is handled," Tunnell says. "They'll run one herd into another management area and say it's overpopulated. Then they'll take a certain number of horses off the land. The cattle ranchers have a significant say on how those ranges are managed. The managers will do anything to keep those ranchers off their hind ends. The whole purpose is to remove wild horses from the public lands. If they could decimate the herds to where they could die out and become extinct, it would make the politicians and the bureaucrats extremely happy "

Others confirm this. Former BLM director Jim Baca, who writes, "During my tenure as director of the BLM I was very concerned about the program," called for a special administrator to assess the program.

A bit more than a century ago, the national bison herd numbered upwards of 50 million. Massed and moving, they looked to the human eye like an undulating ocean of dark brown water. Colonel R. I. Dodge, driving out to Fort Larned on the Pawnee River in Kansas, recorded a herd 25 miles long and 50 miles deep. That was in 1871. He was shunned. A few years later, the railroad men decided the buffalo were in the way and put a bounty on hides. By the decade's end, Colonel Dodge's herd was no more. Poof Gone. Abracadabra.

Just as Houdini might do, those railroad men did. As if all that buffalo meat were nothing, as if it amounted to about the size of a rabbit, the bison were stuffed into a hat and were made to disappear. When there was complaining about the slaughter from as far away as Washington and even London, General Phil Sheridan told the Texas state legislature, "Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle, and the festive cowboy."

The national mustang herd is about to go the same way, warn horse advocates. "When the BLM talks about overpopulation, I talk about underpopulation. Some of the horses in the wild are in herd areas so small that their genetic diversity is threatened. Their survival into the future is in doubt," says Ginger Kathrens, a wildlife filmmaker who has followed the horses for several years and owns several through the adoption program.

When the BLM culls horses by bringing them in for adoption, the agency often disposes of a huge part of a herd, as high as 80 percent. One notice of horse culling declared that the agency would dispose of about 1,000 horses out of a herd of 1,200. Another notice declared the agency would bring in 280 animals from a herd of 330.

"With numbers like those," says Kathrens, "it doesn't take very long to see an erosion of their ability to adapt to changes like weather shifts or grazing conditions." Kathrens says the horses belong here. The fox-sized eohippus lived on our North American continent about 58 million years ago. It did well, evolving into the modern horse, until about 8,000 years ago, when, for reasons that remain unclear, it died out. The Spanish brought it back in the 1500s, and since then it has thrived on the high plains.

The horses are much more than just feral domestic horses. Having been up there now for nearly five centuries, their genetics shifted to give them the hardiness to enable them to survive 500 winters on the western plains. In particular, the mustangs have tremendous endurance. They can thrive on food that a domesticated horse would hardly touch. Their feet can take the kind of rocky ground that would make a well-bred horse go lame in five minutes.

Says Kathrens, "They don't belong in BLM's holding corrals. They belong where they were born to be, in the wild. They have a very close family unit out there, led by a band stallion and a lead mare. The mare leads them to water; the stallion takes the rear and protects them. If you watch them, you'll see how close they are, the mutual grooming and affection that goes on. It's just wonderful to appreciate how beautiful this social structure is--and then you'll see what happens when they fly in there with their helicopters.

"BLM and U.S. Forest Service data indicate that about 3 percent of the beef comes from animals that are on our public lands. Over the years there's been an incredible diminishment of the range for very little return. After all, two-thirds of the red meat in this country is grown east of the Mississippi. We could preserve our federal lands as the true ecosystem that it should be, not just as a place for exotic cattle to tramp around." Kathrens is quite clear. By "exotic" she means the biological sense of the word--"foreign, "not native," "not belonging," "interloper," "invader."

The Fund for Animals and the Animal Protection Institute, organizations that had sued BLM and won in the past for failing to protect the horses, took BLM back to court in 1997 in Reno. Terms of a negotiated settlement, announced last October, include requiring slaughterhouses to notify enforcement agencies when freeze-branded BLM horses come through their plant. Howard Gystal, attorney for the Fund, writes: "This settlement will halt the BLM's version of 'Don't ask, don't tell.'"

But what about the mustangs stolen before they're branded? What about mustangs "double-booked," where one brand is put on two mustangs? What about mustangs with the brand clipped out before a sale? People involved with the horses remain skeptical. "The problem's not solved yet," says Sederwall. "It will never be solved." Tunnell also is clear: "Nope. You've got an organization with a lot of people inside that've built their little fiefdom. It's never going to change. They can lie about things and control information."

When you've got a \$500 bill owned by the government walking around on four hoofs, somebody's going to figure out a way to embezzle it. For this reason, say advocates, it's better to leave the animals out on the range where they were born--and where it's harder to get at them.

"Obviously, we would like to see the horses left where they are," says Mike Markarian of the Fund for Animals. "There's a lot of speculation that because horses compete with cattle, the BLM is caving in to cattle ranchers."

Bud Cribley swears things have changed. Cribley, the new wild-horse program leader, doesn't deny that the adoption program had problems when he took it over last October. "From our point of view," says Cribley, "about the allegations that were brought forward--the BLM did everything it could to cooperate in those allegations both internally and with the Department of Justice." He contends the allegations never went forward because the grand jury never indicted anyone. He will not discuss that particular matter any further. Many of these problems, he insists, have been addressed to the best of the agency's abilities and the agency is strongly committed to continued monitoring. But he's hamstrung, he says, by the 1971 law because it doesn't give him enough direction. He needs, he says, a clear answer to one essential question: who gets the grass?

Horse advocate Nancy Whitaker, formerly with the Animal Protection Institute in California, has paid close attention to grass for more than 10 years. She maintains that mustang management has been based on the needs of the cows. To favor the cattlemen, Whitaker claims, wild-horse population figures are purposely inflated.

Cribley denies this, again complaining about the act's vagueness. "Because of the law, the horses have the same standing as the livestock. Essentially what we do is go through the land-use planning process. It's a difficult and complex issue, a balance between the different interest groups. BLM is mandated to manage for the horses, but the law doesn't say how much forage the horses get. It's a decision that's made on a site-by-site basis."

Would Cribley be happier if the law were clearer? Would he, for example, prefer a law that said, "Horses are to receive X amount of grass on Y sites"?

"It would be a heck of a lot easier," Cribley says. "But it's not defined that way at all--just the fact that we will manage for horses." And Cribley is clear about the role of wild-horse advocates: "The more they participate, the better their position in those discussions."

In other words, until Washington improves the 1971 law, his hands are tied. Cows, after all, sell at the killer's for a good chunk of change.

Wendy Williams reports on national and international environmental issues.

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