

www.publicland.org

Public Lands Foundation

Editor - Glen Collins - glendone@aol.com

The Public Lands Foundation (PLF) is a non-profit organization that is an advocate for professional multiple use management and protection of the public lands administered by the US Bureau of Land Management. The following summarizes the PLF's positions on major land management issues affecting these public lands. **You can see the full position statement by clicking on the title of the Position Paper.** For more information about the position statements, please contact the Public Lands Foundation, PO Box 7226, Arlington, Virginia 22207.

The Public Lands Foundation (PLF) is a 501 (C)(3) non-profit national conservation organization founded in 1987. PLF's mission is to foster the proper use, protection and management of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered lands. It is a fast-paced passionate, advocate organization keeping policy makers and the general public aware of what is happening to the public lands. All PLF members, most of who are retired former BLM employees, and its Board of Directors serve without compensation as volunteers.

WILD FREE ROAMING HORSE AND BURRO MANAGEMENT ON PUBLIC LAND ADMINISTERED BY THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growth and expansion of wild horse and burro herds are causing resource damage on the public lands and excessive government expenditures on an animal adoption program is not solving the problem. The PLF believes that either: the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 should be amended to provide for the establishment of National Wild Horse and Burro Ranges which will be managed primarily for maintaining healthy herds of wild horses and/or burros and to provide for removing all feral horses and burros from the public lands outside these Ranges. This is the Foundation's preferred option. Or: adequate funds and staff should be provided to implement the BLM's 1992 "Strategic Plan for the Management of Wild Horses and Burros on public Lands" which places emphasis on habitat management and provides for managing the existing wild horse and burro herds as part of the existing multiple use mix, using

such methods as selective gathers to enhance adoptability and fertility controls to keep herd numbers at appropriate levels.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The wild horse and burro herds of today are feral descendants of animals introduced in North America by early European explorers, miners and settlers. Certain populations are said to be descended from animals brought to the continent by Spaniards coming to what is now the United States of America by way of Mexico and coastal California. Others were brought by the English and French to the Atlantic coast. However, the populations that the Bureau of Land Management is responsible for are mostly of a much more recent origin. They descend from horses and burros lost or abandoned by settlers, miners, the U.S. Cavalry and ranching enterprises. Genetic testing has revealed genetic links to more than 10 domestic breeds, including Appaloosa, Arabian, Morgan, Quarter Horse, and Thoroughbred as well as to those descended from Spanish stock.

There are no effective natural predators to limit the growth and expansion of wild horse and burro herds and without man's intervention overpopulation and the resulting resource degradation is inevitable. Prior to 1971, wild horse and burro populations were kept in check by persons who captured them for domestication and use, for slaughter and/or to reduce competition between the feral animals and domestic animals or native wildlife. These gathers were without regulation and there were cases of animal abuse and waste. In 1971, at the urging of a Nevada woman named Velma Johnston, the Wild Free Roaming Horse And Burro Act was signed into law. Wild free roaming horses and burros were declared, in the Act, to be "living symbols of the historic and pioneering spirit of the West " to be "protected from capture, branding, harassment or death" and " to be considered, in the area where presently found, as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands." While there are relatively small numbers of wild horses and burros on some of the National Forests, most are on Bureau of Land Management administered land and that agency was given the responsibility of implementing the Act.

Early efforts to initiate wild horse and burro management included the establishment of Wild Horse Ranges in Nevada in 1961, in the Pryor Mountains of Montana in 1968 and in the Little Bookcliffs of Colorado in 1980. The first use of the adoption system to dispose of excess animals was in Montana with horses from the Pryor Mt. Wild Horse Range in 1973. The Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range stands as an example that the concept of wild horse "Ranges" will work, if properly managed. In 1982, a nominal adoption fee was established to, at least in part, defray the cost of gathers. Also in that year, the Director of the Bureau of Land Management and the Chief of the Forest Service made an administrative decision not to use the authority provided in the 1971 Act to destroy unadopted excess animals, making adoption the only means of disposing of excess animals.

In the absence of effective natural predators and with no effective way to dispose of animals, horse and burro populations practically exploded in the 70's and 80's. In 1985, the Congress tripled the budget for removals and directed the Bureau of Land Management to triple removals. To handle the unadoptable animals removed, wild horse holding facilities were established in Bloomfield, Nebraska, Lovelock, Nevada and Muleshoe, Texas. To try and stem the tide of

additional animals into a totally unworkable system, a fertility control research project was initiated in 1985. While some encouraging results were achieved, the death and injury of a large number of animals associated with the project and the resulting political fallout rendered its results useless to the Bureau of Land Management. The next experiment would be the establishment of a program in 1986 to place unadoptable animals in state prisons where inmates would gentle them to some level that would make them attractive to potential adopters. In 1988, it was determined to establish private sanctuaries where unadoptable animals could live out their lives. It soon became obvious that these expensive experiments were consuming too much of the budget and even exacerbating the problem by extending the life of the unadoptable animal.

In 1971, the total wild horse and burro population in the western United States had been estimated at 9,500 animals. Subsequent census data by the Bureau of Land Management indicated that estimate was probably low. As protests, appeals and law suits interfered with efforts to manage the animals and politically palatable solutions were sought and experimented with, numbers increased to 55,000 by 1990. Damage to rangeland resources, including native wildlife habitat, in wild horse herd areas was severe. Native wildlife species such as deer and antelope were almost completely extirpated from certain habitat areas. The condition of the horses declined from intense competition among themselves for both water and forage. Reproductive rates dropped below 15%, as range condition and animal health declined. Funds sorely needed for removal and adoption were channeled into trying to do something with unadoptable animals instead of managing the program on the ground. The result of that strategy was a disaster.

OVERVIEW:

In 1992, the Bureau of Land Management established the first wild horse and burro management strategy to be based upon realistic biological principals and adoption plans. The strategy was implemented in June of 1992 with very successful results. Expensive and ineffective private sanctuaries were set on a schedule to be phased out and prison program expenses were reduced to only the purchase of food for the animals for a specific period of time (90 days) so more funding could be devoted to on the ground management activities. No more unadoptable animals were taken into captivity and adoption numbers increased immediately. Gathers were increased to meet a set schedule for achieving planned management levels. As range condition improved, deer and antelope were repopulating habitats in places like the Nellis Wild Horse and Burro Range and the reproductive rate of wild mares doubled. Young animals brought in for adoption were larger and healthier.

However, the administration coming into Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management in 1994 did not realize how quickly a feral population could grow out of control and they did not commit the budget necessary to continue effective management and control. Within budget constraints, the strategy continues to work as designed. However, the Congress, the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management must recognize that they are dealing with animals that have no natural biological controls except starvation and dehydration. If there is no will to permit commercial use of horses and burros, the program must be adequately funded to remove the excess and make adoptable animals available to the public in

numbers that will effectively relieve grazing pressure on the habitat until immunocontraception technology can be made to act as a natural control.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following are PLF positions on wild horse and burro management on public lands. Adoption of position No 1 is the best solution to the perpetuation of healthy animals and their habitat. If changes in the 1971 Act are not immediately possible then position No. 2 must be adopted.

Position No. 1 The Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 should be amended to provide for the following management and control practices:

- Establish 10 National Wild Horse and Burro Ranges with clearly defined and fenced boundaries and commit those Ranges primarily to horses and/or burros.

- Remove all feral horses and burros from public lands outside those established Ranges.

- Manage resident populations on those ranges to maintain the health and desirable genetic characteristics of the horse or burro herd and the condition of their habitat.

- Provide visitor access and interpretive facilities.

- Animals in excess of the carrying capacity of the Ranges and those animals gathered from outside the established Ranges would be offered to prospective adopters for a reasonable period and, if not called for, sold to the highest bidder with no restrictions on the future use of the animal.

- Funds generated would be designated for the administration of the Wild Horse and Burro Program with the excess going into the general fund.

Position No. 2. If the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 is not amended, the Strategic Plan for the Management of Wild Horses and Burros on Public Lands of 1992 should be fully funded and implemented . Its provisions were developed by qualified biologists, range scientists, and the full spectrum of interest groups such as wild horse, wildlife, etc.

Key elements of the strategy include:

- a) All existing identified wild horse and/or burro Herd Areas will be retained for management of horses and burros as a part of the existing multiple use mix.

- b) Emphasis shall be on habitat management:

- Monitoring techniques will be established (effective techniques have been established since the strategy was adopted in 1992).

-Habitat analysis and monitoring shall consider the natural behavior and biological needs of horses and burros their relationship to other ecosystem components. Monitoring shall be complimentary to wildlife and livestock monitoring to eliminate duplication of effort.

-Herd census techniques shall determine population numbers, reproductive rates, area of use and seasonal distribution of use.

-Determine through the Resource Management Plan process what the appropriate mix of grazing animals shall be, wildlife, livestock, wild horses/burros.

-Periodically use monitoring data to evaluate and/or adjust the Appropriate Management Level established in the land use plan for horses and burros.

c) A National Wild Horse and Burro Center with state of the art handling facilities is needed. The Center should also feature a focal point for research and development and an interpretive center.

d) The following population management, removal and adoption procedures should be employed:

-Selective gathers should target younger animals, 1 to 5 year olds, to enhance adoptability.

-Selective gathers of females may be done to reduce herd reproductive potential.

-Fertility control technology should be perfected.

-Remove only adoptable animals.

-Where unadoptable animals must be removed from one Herd Management Area to meet resource objectives, they must be sterilized and released in a Herd Management Area that has a population level below its Appropriate Management Level. To assist in this objective, states with significant numbers of horses and burros should have at least one Herd only sterile animals reside and animals released there should be sterilized

-Increase cooperation with all groups interested in the care and management of wild horses and burros to develop volunteer programs to help with adoptions, inspect adopter facilities, provide post adoption service to adopters and to notify The Bureau of Land Management of improper care and maintenance situations.

This Position Statement has been prepared for the purpose of promoting effective and scientific management of the public lands and resources that support herds of wild free roaming horses and burros and maintaining viable herds of these animals in established Herd Management Areas or Ranges, as provided for in the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1967.