

Panel approves wild horse sale ban

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Legislation to reinstate a ban on the commercial sale and slaughter of wild horses and burros was approved by the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee this week.

The bill, which has received bipartisan support, would restore the prohibition on the sale and slaughter of wild horses and burros that was eliminated by a provision inserted into the fiscal year 2005 appropriations bill by then-Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont.

Enacted in 1971, the original law directed the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service to enforce the protection of wild horses on public lands.

To the delight of Western stockmen and the consternation of wild horse advocates, Burns' amendment allowed the sale of any wild horse that has been rounded up and is more than 10 years old or has been unsuccessful in the adoption program three times. Stockmen have voiced concerns that wild horses compete with cattle for limited forage in the dry West, while wild horse advocates have downplayed the competition, noting that wild horses number only 28,000 in a West that has 9 million cattle grazing on public lands.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Nick J. Rahall, D-W.Va., would repeal the 2004 Burns amendment.

The Burns amendment differs from the traditional adoption program because buyers receive ownership title immediately, rather than having to feed and house the animals for a year before receiving title.

The year delay in the adoption program is intended to weed out buyers who want to resell the horses. Without it, under the Burns sale program, 41 horses ended up at a slaughterhouse in Illinois after the BLM sold six to an Oklahoma man who claimed he wanted them for a church youth camp and 35 to a South Dakota tribe that traded them to a third party.

The BLM since has revised its rules to require buyers to sign a statement saying they do not intend to resell the horses for slaughter. They could face criminal prosecution if they do. Horse protection groups say that does no good because there's no way to prove someone's intention.

"Horses have long been a living symbol of the American West. When Americans picture the West, I highly doubt they envision wild horses being rounded up and sent to commercial slaughterhouses to be processed into cuisine for foreign diners. I am pleased that this committee recognizes the irreplaceable value that Americans place on our wild horses," said Rahall, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee and the chief sponsor of the legislation.

Rep. Barbara Cubin, R-Wyo., is no longer on that committee but issued a statement Friday criticizing the bill.

"This bill is a bad piece of legislation and will absolutely not have my support," Cubin said. "What we have here is a misplaced effort by East Coast liberals to micro-manage public lands out West.

"In the West, overpopulated herds of wild horses live off of the same grazing lands Wyoming's ranchers depend on to earn a livelihood. At the same time, these herds also disproportionately impact Wyoming's ecosystem, which must maintain the proper balance in order for our state's abundant wildlife to thrive. Our public lands managers need the tools to manage these overpopulated herds, and this bill does precisely the opposite."

Similar legislation was introduced by Rahall and passed by the House in 2005 and 2006, but those bills were not ultimately signed into law.

Karen Sussman, volunteer director for the International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros, said she expects the Rahall bill to be approved by Congress, given past bipartisan support.

Wyoming's wild horse population in recent years has reached as high as 7,000, more than double the BLM's target management level of 3,263 animals statewide.

There are 16 herd management areas in Wyoming, but most of the state's wild horse populations are concentrated in southwest Wyoming.

A spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Committee said no public hearings on the bill have been scheduled.