

**Trail's End for Horses: Slaughter**  
**Martha Mendoza – Associative Press**

[http://www.wildhorsespirit.org:80/1-5-97\\_martha\\_mendoza\\_trails\\_end\\_horses.htm](http://www.wildhorsespirit.org:80/1-5-97_martha_mendoza_trails_end_horses.htm)

**1-5-97) Reno, Nevada**--A multimillion-dollar federal program created to save the lives of wild horses is instead channeling them by the thousands to slaughterhouses, where they are chopped into cuts of meat. Among those who might be profiting from the slaughter are employees of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the agency that administers the program. These are the conclusions of an Associated Press investigation of the U. S. Wild Horse and Burro Program, which has rounded up 165,000 animals and spent \$250 million since it was created by Congress 25 years ago.

The program was intended to protect and manage wild horses on public lands, where they compete for resources with grazing cattle. The idea: Gather up excess horses and offer them to the public for adoption. Nothing in the law prevents anyone, however, from selling horses to slaughterhouses once they gain ownership. While it is common for old or lame horses to go to slaughter, nearly all former BLM horses sent to slaughter are young and healthy, according to slaughterhouses.

The program's rules let anyone adopt up to four horses per year, paying \$125 for each healthy animal. If the adopters properly care for the horses for one year, they get title to them in the form of BLM certificates bearing a number freeze-branded into each horse's hide. Using freeze-brand numbers and computer records, the AP traced more than 57 former BLM horses sold to the slaughterhouses since September. Eighty percent of them were less than 10 years old and 25% were less than 5 years old. Horses are often ridden well into their twenties. At the **Cavel West Slaughterhouse in Redmond, Ore.**, for example, the proprietor, **Pascal Derde**, displayed a sheaf of BLM certificates for horses he recently butchered and sent to Belgium for human consumption. Asked about the AP's findings, **Tom Pogacnik**, director of the BLM's \$16-million-a-year Wild Horse and Burro Program, **conceded that about 90% of the horses rounded up go to slaughter.** Has a program intended to save wild horses, as a symbol of the American frontier, evolved into a supply system for horse meat? *"I guess that's one way of looking at it,"* Pogacnik said. *"Recognizing that we can't leave them out there, well, at some point critters do have to come off the range."*

**Clifford Hansen**, a former U.S. senator from Wyoming who introduced the bill to create the program, said he now wishes he could remove his name from the legislation. *"The law was intended to recognize the significance of wild horses and burros,"* said Hansen, now 84, *"but talk about a waste of public funds!"*

The government spends up to \$1,100 to round up, vaccinate, freeze brand and adopt out a horse. Although adopters pay \$125 for each healthy horse, a lame or old horse can be bought for as little as \$25, or even acquired free. After holding the horses for a year, adopters are free to sell them for slaughter, typically receiving \$700 per animal from the slaughterhouse. The sellers find no shortage of horsemeat buyers. The demand for American horsemeat has long been strong in Asia and Europe.

Government officials offered conflicting opinions on whether it is legal or ethical for BLM officials to adopt and sell wild horses.

The AP matched computer records of horse adoptions with a computerized list of federal employees and found that more than 200 current BLM employees have adopted more than 600 wild horses and burros. Some of these employees, when contacted, could not account for their animals. Others acknowledge that some of their horses were sent to slaughterhouses.

In Rock Springs, Wyoming, the BLM corrals are run by **Victor McDarment**, whose crew rounds up horses from open ranges in Wyoming and arranges adoptions. According to BLM database records, McDarment has adopted 16 horses. His estranged wife adopted nine. His children adopted at least six. His girlfriend adopted four. His ex-wife adopted one. His co-workers in the corrals and their families adopted 54. McDarment said he could not account for the whereabouts of all the horses. *"I don't keep track,"* he said. Some ended up with **Dennis Gifford**, a Lovell, Wyoming, rancher and rodeo contractor who said he has tried to breed them for rodeo stock. He said he is sure some of McDarment's horses were slaughtered. They have to end up somewhere, Gifford said.

Federal law prohibits U.S. government employees from using public office for private gain. The U.S. Office of Government Ethics said this means BLM workers are not allowed to profit from BLM programs. But **Gabriel Paone**, the Interior Department's ethics official in Washington, said there is nothing wrong with BLM employees adopting wild horses and then selling them for profit. *"They're not doing this as public officials,"* Paone said. *"They're doing this as private citizens."*

The federal government is conducting several reviews of the Wild Horse and Burro Program, with two audits and two reports to Congress expected to be completed in 1997. *"I welcome the scrutiny,"* Pogacnik said. *"It can only help."*

Roundup is Beginning of End for Herds.

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