

## **Government Approved Slaughter**

by Walter M. Brasch

Almost every day, a dozen or so wild burros come down from the foothills of the Black Mountains of northwestern Arizona onto the main street of Oatman, a revitalized high desert mining town about 15 miles from where California, Nevada, and Arizona meet.

No one remembers when the burros first came into the mountain town that is bisected by the hairpin curves and switchbacks of Old Route 66, but they do know burros have lived in the area for more than a century. However, it wasn't until the tourists began visiting the town in the early 1970s that the burros made their regular visits, arriving each day on no set schedule, but usually leaving about 4:30–5 p.m. when the tourists leave.

The townspeople provide love, concern, funds for veterinarian bills, and two water troughs for the burros who work the Main Street tourist industry. Sometimes the residents will brush the burros, but the burros themselves are adept at making sure the entire pack is clean and groomed. The tourists pet the burros, have their pictures taken with them, chat with them, and feed them carrots, available for \$1 a bag from the Oatman General Store or any of a dozen other stores. The burros work for food.

Once protected by federal law, the nation's 3,000 wild burros and 33,000 wild horses, as well as 24,000 horses in short- and long-term sanctuaries, now face Congressionally-approved slaughter.

Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) inserted a rider into the 3,000 page omnibus spending bill of 2005, approved by Congress and signed into law by President Bush, that requires the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to sell all wild horses and burros which have not been adopted in three attempts or which are 10 years or older. Wild burros have life spans of 25–30 years; domesticated burros can live 45 years; wild horses have life spans of 20–25 years. The animals, according to the legislation, "shall" be sold, and can be butchered. There were no hearings or debate.

The public may not know what forces helped convince Burns to silently insert the rider into the Appropriations Act, but one thing is certain—the beef industry has its brand all over it.

During the mid-1800s, more than 2.3 million wild horses and 60 million bison freely roamed America's west. But, ranchers, who had already seized land from the Indians and were deep into a land war with farmers, saw horses as competition for unfenced grazing land. They poisoned the horses' watering holes, blinded the lead stallions by shooting their eyes out, or simply ran them to death, up and over cliffs, according to Mike Markarian, executive vice-president of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Ranchers

**“even captured wild mustangs, sewed their nostrils shut with rawhide so they could barely breathe, and returned them to their herds so they would slow down the other horses and make them much easier to capture,” says Markarian. In 1897, Nevada allowed unlimited killing of mustangs.**

**By 1900, the bison were almost extinct, the result of indiscriminate killing during the nation’s “Manifest Destiny.” A half-century later, mustangs were close to meeting the same fate as the bison. That’s when Velma Johnston, to become known as “Wild Horse Annie,” began a national campaign to save wild horses and burros. It took two decades until Congress unanimously passed the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 that gave federal protection to the animals and made it a felony for anyone to capture or harm them.**

**In 1974, the first federal census of wild horses and burros revealed that only 60,000 remained in Arizona, California, Idaho, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. The BLM plans to reduce the population on public lands to about 20,000, removing at least 11,500 wild horses and burros in 2005. This number is below the minimum necessary to sustain healthy populations, according to Dr. Gus Cothran, equine geneticist at the University of Kentucky. The minimum number of horses and burros in each herd management area (HMA) needs to be at least 150, says Cothran; under BLM plans, about 70 percent of the HMAs will have fewer than 100 animals. Estimates by animal rights groups place the number that will probably be slaughtered by the end of the year at 6,000–14,000.**

**Prior to the new federal law, the BLM sold “excessive” horses and burros for \$125, and then gave full ownership only after a year, during which time the owner had to provide adequate space, shelter, and care. However, the BLM has a long history of neglectful oversight after the animals are sold, and even has a history of willful violation of the law. In 1997, animal rights activists revealed that BLM employees personally profited by selling mustangs and burros for \$400–\$500 each, and then falsified records. However, under political pressures, the investigation, which had resulted in indictments by a federal grand jury, dissolved.**

**Even if no horses and burros were slaughtered, and current levels maintained, that still would be too much for the ranchers. The 33,000 horses and burros, apparently, are taking up too much space and are infringing upon forage land of the 4.1 million head of cattle. A statement by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association released about the time of the Congressional appropriations measure declared, “excessive numbers of feral horses and burros continue to cause increasing deterioration of range conditions.” Why the cattlemen want more land is a matter of economics as reflected by the AUM. An AUM (animal unit month) is the amount of forage “required to feed an average-size cow and calf per month, or one horse, or five sheep,” according to the BLM; currently, an AUM is about 800 pounds of air-dried foliage. The BLM, in its 2005 budget justification report, apparently bowing to rancher concerns, states that removing the horses and burros will “eliminate the need to reduce permitted livestock grazing during a drought.”**

**The BLM charges ranchers \$1.79 AUM to graze one cow and calf upon public land; the cost to lease private land is \$20–\$50 AUM. Half of the fees collected by the BLM and Forest Service from the ranchers holding about 23,600 permits are eventually returned to them for range improvements. Even with income from the ranchers, the program had a loss of about \$124 million in 2002, according to an independent study conducted by the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson. However, the cost could be \$500 million to \$1 billion to subsidize ranchers because “it was difficult to get a clear idea of just how much money the government is pumping into the federal grazing program [for cattle] to keep it going,” according to Karyn Moskowitz, principal author of the report. Co-author Chuck Romaniello, a BLM economist, raised the problem that “numerous programs both in and outside the two agencies [BLM and Forest Service] also bear costs [and] we could find no system that adequately accounts for all of these costs.” Even raising the grazing fee for cattle to come close to the cost of private leased land “will not cover the real costs,” according to George Wuerthner, one of the researchers. “If we did a full accounting of the ecological costs—soil erosion, extirpation of predators, water pollution, endangered species, spread of weeds, dewatering of rivers for irrigated pasture,” said Wuerthner, “the price we pay annually . . . would be in the billions of dollars.” The report has spurred the Government Accounting Office into an investigation of below-cost grazing on public lands.**

**In contrast, the BLM spends only about \$39 million for the wild horse and burro program. This includes costs of helicopters to round-up the animals and then to ship them to holding facilities where, under the new law, they are likely to be sold for slaughter. About 24,000 wild horses are now in one of 11 holding facilities in Kansas and Oklahoma, at least 8,300 meeting minimal criteria imposed by the repeal of the 1971 law. The cost to keep the horses and burros in the sanctuaries and not running free on land that cattlemen want may be as much as one-third of the budget, an expense not necessary if the horses and burros were allowed to run in herds.**

**The sale of horses to slaughter houses is financially attractive. Depending upon market value, a 1,000 pound mustang can bring \$700–\$900 at a slaughter house. Horse meat is a gourmet meat in Western Europe, Japan, and several other countries. About 65,000 domestic horses, unprotected by any laws, were butchered last year. Because wild horses eat natural grasses, and have not been subjected to mankind’s artificial foods, chemicals, and drugs, the meat is considered especially delicious.**

**The first sale of wild horses under the new federal law was in February to a company in Wyoming, which bought 200 horses for \$10,000, \$50 a horse. Wild Horses Wyoming says it plans to put the horses into a sanctuary, and not sell them. Some ranchers, just wanting the animals off public lands to allow for more cattle, say they will buy the horses and burros, and then create tourist attractions in Mexico. However, there is no guarantee that the animals will be protected or that they won’t then be sold for slaughter in Mexico or transported across the border to Texas, home of two of the nation’s three foreign-owned slaughterhouses.**

**There is a possibility that the 1971 law protecting the animals may be restored. A bill by Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-W.Va.) and Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.), with 15 co-sponsors, is in a**

**subcommittee of the House Resources Committee. The lobbying pressure against the bill is expected to be intense. However, more than 60 national organizations are now on record calling for the repeal of the recently-passed legislation.**

**When it rains in Oatman, Ariz., the burros and the tourists both head for cover beneath the stores' wooden porches, both groups chatting with each other, both groups eating munchies. On a plaque in Oatman is a reality— “[I]f it were not for these burros, in all probability, neither you nor the plaque would be standing here today.” Beneath the wooden awnings of stores, the burros of Oatman remind us that all of us, human and animal, need each other. --Posted 03.14.05**

[Assisting on this story were Rosemary Brasch and Gail Fox. For more information, go to the Humane Society of the United States ([www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)), International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros ([www.ispmb.org](http://www.ispmb.org)), American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign ([www.wildhorsepreservation.com](http://www.wildhorsepreservation.com)), Alliance of Wild Horse Advocates ([www.aowha.org](http://www.aowha.org)), and Bureau of Land Management ([www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov)) Brasch is an award-winning journalist, author of 14 books, and a university professor. His latest book is America's Unpatriotic Acts; the federal Government's Violation of Constitutional and Civil Rights. You may contact him through his website at [www.walterbrasch.com](http://www.walterbrasch.com)]