

# Wild Horses and Burros on Public Lands

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On December 15, 1971, Congress passed legislation to protect, manage, and control wild horses (*Equus caballus*) and burros (*E. asinus*) on public lands. The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (Public Law 92-195) described these animals as fast-disappearing symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service are charged with administering the law, which specifies how wild horses and burros are to be managed on the range and how excess animals are to be disposed. Section 3.(a) requires the Secretary of the Interior to manage wild free-roaming horses and burros in a manner designed to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on public lands. This section also specifies requirements for inventorying, monitoring, establishing appropriate management levels, making removals, placing excess animals, and establishing criteria for destruction of animals.

Although these animals were once considered endangered by the nearly unrestrained onslaught of the mustangers and others, they have thrived under federal protection (Fig. 1). With few predators and with protection from humans, wild horse and burro populations on BLM-administered lands (where most of the animals are located) quickly grew until control of the populations and the effect on their habitat became a major concern.

The act requires that BLM maintain a current inventory of wild horses and burros on certain public lands. At present, BLM censuses each of the 196 herd-management areas on a rotating basis, usually every 3 years, using census techniques based on research published by the [National Academy of Sciences \(1982\)](#). Censuses in 1993 identified a nationwide population of 46,500 wild horses and burros (Fig. 2). Accuracy for the 1993 census ranged from 85% to 99% on wild horses and 75% to 88% on wild burros.

Annual population growth in wild horse herds varies from 5% to 25%, depending on range and environmental conditions, with 15% being a long-term average. At this rate of increase, wild horse populations may double in 5 years. The annual growth in wild burro populations has not been determined, but their reproductive capacity may be similar to that of wild horse herds.

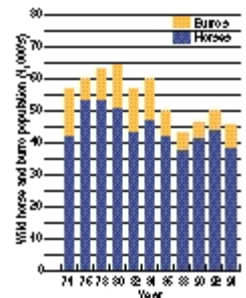
Wild horses (*Equus caballus*). Courtesy T. Pogacnik, BLM

The act specifies that wild horses and burros may be managed only on lands where they existed on December 15, 1971, the time of the act's passage. The population of wild horses



**Fig. 1.** Wild horse and burro population trends in BLM-administered lands since passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

**Fig. 2.** Wild horses and burros in 1993: population by state.



and burros within those 1971 areas of use was estimated at 17,000 animals; however, at that time no formal inventory policies or procedures existed to census populations. The BLM now has 269 herd areas, 196 within which wild horses and burros are managed to some extent and 73 from which all wild horses and burros will be removed.

Wild horse and burro herd areas occupy almost 43 million acres (17.4 million ha) of public and private land in Arizona (about 4 million acres or 1.6 million ha), California (6 million+ acres or 2.4 million ha), Colorado (800,000+ acres or 324,000 ha), Idaho (450,000+ acres or 182,250 ha), Montana (55,000+ acres or about 22,275 ha), Nevada (nearly 19 million acres or nearly 8 million ha), New Mexico (nearly 150,000 acres or 60,750 ha), Oregon (nearly 4 million acres or 1.6 million ha), Utah (2.5 million acres or 1 million ha), and Wyoming (nearly 6 million acres or 2.4 million ha) ([BLM 1993](#)).

Within most herd areas, wild horses and burros graze with domestic livestock and a variety of indigenous wildlife species. Because they are generalist species, wild horses and burros inhabit a variety of habitats and vegetative communities.

The BLM's land-use planning process and evaluation of current inventory and monitoring data are used to determine a population level that maintains a thriving natural ecological balance with other uses. The act directs BLM to achieve appropriate population levels by removals, humane destruction, or other options, including antifertility methods.

BLM no longer destroys healthy excess wild horses and burros. Since 1973, when the first removals occurred, BLM has removed 141,762 wild horses and burros from public land and placed 122,627 animals into private care through the Adopt-A-Horse program.

Removing excess animals from populations that exceed appropriate numbers is expensive, has restricted BLM's attempts to pursue other management alternatives, and therefore has often allowed populations to increase dramatically. When populations reached crisis proportions, funding was increased and large numbers of excess animals were removed from the range and placed with private citizens through the adoption program. The number of animals removed often was greater than the number that could be adopted, resulting in high costs for feeding and veterinary services while animals were held pending adoption.

In June 1992 the Director of BLM approved the Strategic Plan for the Management of Wild Horses and Burros on Public Lands ([BLM 1992](#)). This plan represents BLM's first comprehensive policy for addressing wild horse and burro management. To reduce the frequency of removals, the plan recommends the use of antifertility management to slow population growth to a level where removals are only required on a cycle of 5 or more years

instead of the current 3-year cycle. Pending the availability of practical and cost-effective fertility-control techniques, selective removal of animals based on age or sex is being used to reduce the growth rate in wild horse populations. The negative aspects of selective removal include the difficulty of predicting results through computer modeling and the extensive monitoring needed to ensure that age and sex ratios have not been altered to a level that could threaten the herd. Selective removals for controlling population growth are considered a temporary management option until research on immunocontraception is completed and can be implemented.

The BLM supports research on the use of immunocontraception for controlling wild horse population growth. Successful immunocontraceptive antigens have been developed; researchers are now trying to develop a system that would inhibit reproduction for 2 to 3 years (J.F. Kirkpatrick, Deacones Medical Research Institute, Billings, personal communication).

Before the passage of the act, wild horses and burros were often captured and destroyed as nuisances or were sold for profit, chiefly for use in commercial products. The methods employed in their capture and destruction were often less than humane. As public awareness of these animals grew, so too did support for federal legislation to protect them from inhumane treatment.

Public interest in the wild horse and burro program continues to direct implementation of the act. Since the act's passage in 1971, there have been 44 district court suits and in excess of 200 appeals of BLM decisions to the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

**For further  
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