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The unbridled range

Proposed slaughter ban could unleash unwanted horses on public, private land

West of Hagerman, hidden in a dusty valley flanked by bluffs and within earshot of the U.S. Air Force's thunderous bombing ranges, tribes of multi-colored horses - led by warring studs - survive in a delicate balance.

They depend on sparse patches of cheatgrass and metal water troughs - provided by the Bureau of Land Management for the horses to share with grazing cattle, elk and antelopes. Birth control limits the horses to about 150 head.

You never hear about these horses unless your cattle graze on the range. Most Idahoans only see the nearly quarter-million horses resting in Idaho's stables, lolling next to tall haystacks, earning prizes at rodeos.

But if Congress finalizes a total ban on horse slaughter for human consumption, domesticated and wild horses could merge and spread over patchworks of private and public lands with catastrophic results, Idaho equine regulators and BLM officials say.

Their bet is that under an economic pinch, Idahoans will dump their horses on rangeland rather than euthanize them - a pattern that's already taken hold since domestic slaughter for human consumption was banned last year.

"Particularly in the West, we are witnessing an increase in the number of unwanted horses dumped on public or private rangelands," said Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, on the congressional record in December, adding that rescue organizations are "stretched to capacity and we expect an increase in need."

Craig's comments were made in opposition to two bills presented in Congress, the Senate version sponsored by Sens. Mary Landrieu, D-La., and John Ensign, R-Nev., both of which aim to close the final loophole in the U.S. slaughter ban.

Current laws prohibit the domestic slaughter of horses but allow groups such as the Twin Falls Livestock Commission to export horses for slaughter to Mexico and Canada.

Ethics of slaughter

While Craig does not mention in his comments the horrific portrayals of horse slaughter that have mobilized those calling for an end to the practice, images of inhumane animal treatment have spurred on the impending legislation.

Many animal rights organizations say horses are transported to foreign countries for slaughter without food or water.

After horses arrive at slaughterhouses, the killing methods are inhumane, according to the U.S. Humane Society. The organization captured on video an event at a facility in Juarez, Mexico, where a horse consciously survived multiple stabbings attempting to sever the animal's spinal cord. At one plant in Canada, the Humane Society documented cases where a horse continued to thrash after it was shot in the head with a captive bolt.

Those images, which have incensed many Americans against the practice of foreign horse slaughter, have yet to garner the same empathy from many Idahoans. What goads Idahoans is the prospect that without horse slaughter, rangelands will be choked with unwanted horses, many left to die.

"All these do-gooders that want this slaughter thing stopped - they think it's so inhumane - you're going to have horses suffering 10 times as much," said Larry Hayhurst, the state brand inspector in Meridian. "There's no out for these unwanted horses. They are going to turn them out. They are going to turn them out downtown. They are going to turn them out on public ground. And they are going to turn them out everywhere."

The "do-gooders," organizations such as the Humane Society, counter that the outlook isn't that dismal. Anyone who can afford to care for a horse for one month could spend that same amount of money on humane euthanasia, said Nancy Perry, vice president of government affairs for the Humane Society. All it takes is a bit of personal accountability, she said.

"Most people who own a horse can actually afford to have the vet come out and give them a really painless injection," Perry said. "I think a lot of it is people needing to take responsibility for their property. Recognize that horses aren't toasters. They actually need a lot of care."

Clearing the range

Idaho horse owners, many of whom are more concerned about the costs of animal care and protecting rangelands than the ethics of slaughter, first started to feel the pinch last year when three foreign-owned horse slaughtering plants in Texas and Illinois closed down.

It was 100 years ago that the U.S. Forest Service began killing wild horses roaming in southern Twin Falls County to protect rangelands, according to historical records. That opened an era in which southern Idahoans relied upon slaughter as a primary way to control horse populations - until the 2007 closures.

Since then, Mexico and Canada have the only accessible slaughterhouses for 90,000 "unwanted" horses nationwide that were no longer being slaughtered at U.S. plants, according to Craig's speech in late 2007.

The number of horses sold for slaughter each month in Twin Falls has been cut in half, said Bruce Billington, owner of the Twin Falls Livestock Commission. The market dwindled along with the value of horses, he said.

That pattern mirrored the national trend. The number of American horses slaughtered dropped 20 percent, from almost 133,912 in 2006 to 106,963 in 2007, as the change rolled into effect, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The results at the sale yard are already staggering and about to get worse, Billington said.

Colts are often sold for just a few bucks, he said. Other horses brought in for sale are routinely turned away at sale yards thanks to the practice of tightened screening, Hayhurst said. Horse owners who cannot afford \$150 for feed each month will simply leave their horses in the sale yard rather than pay \$200 for euthanizing the horse. Hayhurst said that makes the ancient epidemic of horse thieving somewhat of a bitter joke in this region.

About one-quarter of the 200 horses sold each month in Twin Falls are purchased by representatives of Canadian and Mexican slaughterhouses, Billington said. A portion of those 50 or so horses would likely be set loose or, if kept, be underfed and otherwise abused, Billington said.

"You can't imagine the damage it will cause," he said. "I don't know whether I'll be able to take them anymore. I just won't be able to sell them anymore. It's going to make people into criminals. They will try to get them across the state line somehow. They will turn them out in BLM (land)."

The growing herd

And to rub salt in that wound, BLM officials report that there is a pack of at least 30 domesticated horses roaming BLM desert stretches near Twin Falls. Add those horses to the documented 150 wild horses in the western part of the county and local BLM officials say they are already beginning to see the precursors of an expensive, complicated resource management mess.

Ken Crane, a rangeland management specialist for the Jarbidge BLM field office, said the horses would compete for grazing acres with ranchers' herds, causing a thinning out of vegetation. The horses would not know how to find water sources, he said. Some horses would adapt while others that have hooves requiring trimming would become lame.

The bills now before Congress will "tie the hands of horse owners, public and private land managers and others" by further constraining "the already limited options for disposal of unwanted horses," Craig said. "There are numerous reasons for the existence of unwanted horses, not the least of which are economic reasons such as loss of jobs, price of feed or stabling, relocation, poor health of the horse or its owner."

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