

A Primer on Current Federal Wild Horse & Burro Management Status

Federal management of wild horses and burros began in 1959 with the passage of H.R. 2725 (The Airplane Act, Public Law 86-234, 1959). This bill prohibited the use of motorized vehicles and aircraft, and the pollution of waterholes for the purpose of hunting, capturing, killing, trapping, wounding, or maiming of any wild unbranded horse, mare, colt or burro running at large on any of the public land or ranges. In 1971, the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act" (Public Law 92-195) became law, placing the animals under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Interior for the purpose of protection and management to achieve and maintain a thriving ecological balance on public lands where horses and burros were present at that time. The Act has been amended on four occasions since its passage (1976, 1978, 1996, and 2005).

In addition to direct amendments to the Act, several Interior appropriation bills during the last two decades have contained language that has inhibited the Bureau of Land Management's ability to keep on-range horse and burro populations at appropriate management levels. These language riders have eliminated the use of euthanization and unrestricted sales for commercial product use. Riders to USDA appropriations have also restricted equine slaughter inspections causing disruptions in wild horse and burro adoption demand, substantially increasing the number of off-range equids managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Scientists and land managers generally agree that a critical point has been reached. The status quo cannot continue, otherwise it will jeopardize future management and use options for many public lands. For instance, the success of the massive sage-grouse planning effort of the last 20 years is in peril. Throughout much of the Intermountain West, the quantity of late-season brood habitat (meadows, green/wet/damp areas) is the limiting factor for sage grouse survival. It is no surprise that this type of habitat is also the preferred habitat of federally managed horses and burros. Virtually all herbivores prefer green forage over standing cured (dry, dead, coarse) plants. Year-round overuse by horses and burros in many areas has literally destroyed these habitats where their ranges overlap.

Three groups of large grazing/foraging animals are present on public lands: 1) domestic cattle and sheep; 2) big game wildlife species; and 3) wild horses and burros. In the case of domestic animals, all three components of the grazing process are managed: timing, duration, and intensity. Permittees are required each year to manage turn-out dates, length of grazing season, and how many animal unit months can be utilized. For big game species, turn out dates and duration of the foraging season are irrelevant since the animals are on the range year-round. However, the intensity of grazing is managed through the issuance of hunting permits that are tied to the carrying capacity of the seasonal habitats animals use. For instance, if there is drought or fire that reduces habitat carrying capacity, more hunting permits are usually issued. As the habitat increases in carrying capacity, fewer permits may be issued to allow the game population to grow. Wild horses and burros are like big game species in that timing and duration of grazing cannot be controlled, and with the absence of equid eating predators, the only way to manage the intensity of wild horse and burro grazing is through the gather process. Removal of animals from the rangeland habitat is crucial to management. Anything that truncates or interferes with the BLM and USFS mandates to keep animal numbers in balance with the habitat carrying capacity, will eventually result in resource or habitat degradation. It is now documented that habitat degradation has occurred and will continue to occur if wild horse and burro populations continue to grow at the current exponential rate.