



Bureau of Land Management, January 2010

## Wild Horse and Burro Management Factsheet

### The BLM's Multiple-Use Mission

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the U.S. Interior Department, protects, manages, and controls wild horses and burros that roam across 32 million acres of Western public rangelands. Management of these iconic animals is part of the BLM's overall multiple-use mission, as set forth in the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act. In all, the BLM manages 253 million acres of public lands, located primarily in 12 Western states, including Alaska.

When Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, it found these special animals – designated as “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West” – were “fast disappearing from the American scene” because of their lack of legal protection. Now, nearly 40 years after that landmark law was enacted, wild horses and burros are experiencing robust population growth under Federal protection.

### Gathering Wild Horses and Burros from the Range

As a result of rapid herd growth, the BLM must remove thousands of wild horses and burros from the range each year to protect public rangelands from the environmental effects of herd overpopulation. Currently, the Western rangeland free-roaming population of 37,000 wild horses and burros exceeds by more than 10,000 the number that the BLM has determined can exist in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses. The ecosystems of public rangelands, which provide habitat for wildlife, are simply not able to withstand impacts (such as soil erosion) resulting from overpopulated herds. A moratorium on gathers, as advocated by wild horse advocacy groups, is untenable because wild horses and burros have virtually no natural predators, their herd populations grow at an average rate of 20 percent a year, and herd sizes can therefore double every four years.

### GAO Finding: “Critical Crossroads”

The BLM finds itself in the position of needing to gather overpopulated herds from Western rangelands each year while its off-the-range holding costs spiral upward and public demand for adoptable horses declines. Recognizing this situation as unsustainable, the Government Accountability Office, in a report issued in October 2008, found the Bureau to be at “*critical crossroads*.” In response, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and BLM Director Bob Abbey announced on Oct. 7, 2009, a new initiative aimed at putting the BLM's wild horse and burro program on a sustainable track. Details of the initiative, which seeks to bring herd growth rates into alignment with public adoption demand, among other things, can be found at [www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov).

### What Wildlife Groups Can Do

Conservation/wildlife groups can bring facts, reason, and a special perspective to an issue dominated by emotion. Such groups can explain to the public the consequences of not effectively managing and controlling wild horses and burros on Western public rangelands.

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## **Wild Horse and Burro Quick Facts**

**Updated as of December 18, 2009**

### **Wild Horse and Burro Population**

The Bureau of Land Management estimates that nearly 37,000 wild horses and burros (approximately 33,100 horses and 3,800 burros) are roaming on BLM-managed rangelands in 10 Western states based on the latest data available, compiled as of February 28, 2009. Wild horses and burros have virtually no natural predators and their herd sizes can double about every four years. As a result, the agency must remove thousands of animals from the range each year to control herd sizes.

**The estimated current free-roaming population exceeds by some 10,350 the number that the BLM has determined can exist in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses. The appropriate management level is approximately 26,600.**

Off the range, there are more than 34,000 other wild horses and burros that are fed and cared for at short-term corrals and long-term pastures. (As of November 2009, there were approximately 12,500 in corrals and 22,000 in Midwestern pastures.) All wild horses and burros in holding, like those roaming the public rangelands, are protected by the BLM under the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act.

### **Wild Horse and Burro Budget**

In the most recent fiscal year (2009), which ended September 30, holding costs were approximately \$29 million, or about 70 percent of the total congressionally enacted wild horse and burro program budget of \$40.6 million for FY 2009. When money re-programmed from other programs is included, the BLM spent more than \$50 million on the wild horse and burro program in FY 2009.

### **Removing Wild Horses and Burros from the Range and Placing Animals in Adoption**

To ensure that herd sizes are in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses, the BLM removed 6,413 wild horses and burros from the range in Fiscal Year 2009. The Bureau placed 3,487 animals into private care through adoption in FY 2009 -- down from 5,701 in FY 2005. Since 1971, the

BLM has adopted out nearly 225,000 horses and burros. For more information about adoptions, please visit [How to Adopt](#) and the national adoption schedule.

With regard to a call by advocacy groups for a moratorium on all BLM gathers of herds, this is untenable given the fact that herds grow at an average rate of 20 percent a year and can double in size every four years. The ecosystems of public rangelands are not able to withstand such impacts from overpopulated herds. **As for the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, Section 1333 of that law mandates that once the Interior Secretary "determines...on the basis of all information currently available to him, that an overpopulation exists on a given area of the public lands and that action is necessary to remove excess animals, he shall immediately remove excess animals from the range so as to achieve appropriate management levels."**

### **Sale Authority**

About 8,400 wild horses and burros became eligible for sale under the December 2004 sale-authority law, which directs the BLM to sell "without limitation" animals that are either more than 10 years old or have been passed over for adoption at least three times. Since 2005, the Bureau has sold more than 3,700 horses and burros. *The BLM has not been selling any wild horses or burros to slaughterhouses or to "killer buyers."*

The proceeds from the sale of the eligible animals are used for the BLM's wild horse and burro adoption program, as directed by Congress under the sale-authority law.

### **BLM's Legal Mandates**

The BLM manages the nation's public lands for multiple uses, in accordance with the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act. The Bureau manages wild horses and burros as part of this multiple-use mandate.

The BLM manages, protects, and controls wild horses and burros under the authority of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (as amended by Congress in 1976, 1978, 1996, and 2004). This law authorizes the BLM to remove excess wild horses and burros from the range to sustain the health and productivity of the public lands.

### **Law Enforcement**

In enforcing the 1971 Act, the BLM continues to work with law-enforcement authorities in the investigation and prosecution of those who violate this landmark law. The text of the law can be accessed [here](#).

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### **"What Happened to the 19 Million Acres?"**

***Frequently Asked Question:*** In 1971, wild horses and burros were found roaming across 51.3 million acres of Herd Areas, of which 40.3 million acres were under the BLM's jurisdiction. Today the BLM manages wild horses and burros in subsets of these Herd Areas (known as Herd Management Areas) that comprise 31.9 million acres, of which 26.6 million acres are under BLM management. What happened to the 19-plus million acres on which these animals were originally found roaming?

***Answer:*** More than four million acres of the original 51.3 million consisted of state or private land not controlled by the BLM. There are numerous other reasons why another 14.9 million acres were removed from wild horse and burro management, such as:

- the absence of one or more critical habitat components (such as forage or water) to sustain horses and burros year-round;
- the claiming of some horses as private livestock during the claiming period provided for in the 1971 law;
- the transfer of some BLM-managed land to other Federal agencies through legislation;
- conflicts with other resources, such as threatened or endangered species;
- and the economic infeasibility of managing some of the original Herd Areas across their original expanse. Over time, some of these same factors -  
- particularly the lack of suitable habitat in arid areas affected by drought and wildfire -- have forced the BLM to eliminate or consolidate some Herd Management Areas, of which there are currently 180.

