



Animal Welfare Institute

900 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, Washington, DC 20003 • www.awionline.org
telephone: (202) 337-2332 • facsimile: (202) 446-2131

Wild Horse and Burro Facts and Myths

Myth: *There are too many wild horses and burros on public lands and their numbers must be reduced.*

FACT: The opposite is true – there are too **few** wild horses and burros on our public lands, and unless their numbers grow, the survival of these special animals is in jeopardy. During the 1800's, it is estimated that there were more than two million wild horses and burros roaming the West. These animals, along with countless wildlife species ranging from bison to wolves to prairie dogs, were the victims of ghastly extermination efforts, primarily to make way for private domestic livestock grazing. Today, there are less than 40,000 wild horses and burros remaining on millions of acres of our Western public lands. Tragically, the interests of these “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West” are being forfeited for those of the livestock industry and other commercial operations.

Many wild horse and burro herds are being managed at such dangerously low numbers that their long-term health and genetic viability are seriously imperiled. In 1999, the federal government sponsored a wild horse and burro population viability forum in which several leading scientific experts including Drs. Gus Cothran, Francis Singer and John Gross, participated. One of the main issues discussed was that smaller, isolated populations of less than 200 animals are particularly vulnerable to the loss of genetic diversity when the number of animals participating in breeding falls below a minimum needed level. This scenario sets the stage for a host of biological problems associated with inbreeding including reduced reproduction and foal survival, reduced adult fitness and physical deformities. Only about one quarter of the herds under active management have a population objective of greater than 150 animals, much less 200. Numerous herds are being managed at levels between 40 to 70 animals and some even fewer. Either geographical or artificial barriers isolate many of these herds. Rather than address this grave problem by increasing population targets for these animals, the agencies charged with their protection, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (FS), have decided to further reduce wild horse and burro numbers by half to a shocking 22,000 wild horses and 2,700 wild burros.

Myth: *Wild horses and burros must be rounded up to save them from dying of starvation or thirst.*

FACT: While the BLM argues that wild horses and burros are being rounded up for their own good to keep them from dying of starvation or dehydration in areas affected by fire and drought throughout the West, animal advocates have frequently found that herd areas stricken by so-called “emergency conditions” weren't nearly as bad off as the BLM claimed. Not only were wild horses and burros doing just fine, but livestock often remained in the same areas or were returned to the areas in short order. Of course, once the wild horses and burros are gone, they are gone for good – moving in the direction of achieving the overall objective of drastically reducing populations as quickly as possible. By attempting to justify extra removals as “emergencies,” the BLM is able to tap into emergency funds from other programs and go over and above their allocated budgets to meet this goal.

Tragically, many wild horse and burro herds suffer needlessly due to the fact that they have been unable to roam freely throughout their entire herd areas because of fences and other impediments that have

been constructed to accommodate livestock. Hence, they are unable to access forage and water to which they are legally entitled. Wild horses and burros have survived droughts and fires in the past and will survive them in the future, just as do other wild animals, if they are treated as wild animals and left alone.

Myth: Wild horses and burros are destructive to the environment and must be removed in order to protect ecosystem health.

FACT: Wild horses and burros, like any wildlife species, have an impact on the environment, but due to their natural behavior, their impact is minimal. In fact, wild horses and burros play a beneficial ecological role, for example, by dispersing seeds through elimination, thereby helping to reseed the landscape. They also blaze trails during heavy snowfall and break ice at watering holes, helping weaker animals to survive during harsh winter months. Wild horses and burros can also serve as food for predator species such as mountain lions.


That said, if BLM and FS officials would have the public believe that they are genuinely concerned about ecosystem health, then they must refrain from conducting business as usual -- viz., turning a blind eye to the indisputably overriding cause of habitat degradation: livestock grazing and public encroachment. For years, the agencies have permitted extremely high levels of livestock use on public lands, resulting in soil erosion, water contamination and depletion, as well as deterioration of vegetation. While wild horses and burros may be blamed for these problems, the agencies' own data indicate otherwise. Little has changed since the release of the 1990 U.S. General Accounting Office Report, [Improvements Needed in Federal Wild Horse Program](#), which concluded "... the primary cause of the degradation in rangeland resources is poorly managed domestic (primarily cattle and sheep) livestock." Unlike cattle who tend to congregate and settle in riparian areas, wild horses and burros are highly mobile, typically visiting watering areas for only short periods of time. To make matters worse, livestock are concentrated in grazing allotments at artificially high densities during the critical growing season when vegetation is extremely vulnerable to permanent damage. This overgrazing sets the stage for habitat degradation that may not be immediately apparent, but can cumulatively cause massive vegetation die-off.

Myth: Wild horses and burros are an exotic or a feral species and must be removed to protect native wildlife.

FACT: Not so. The paleontological record shows that the cradle of equine evolution occurred in North America, beginning more than 60 million years ago. Conventional theories postulate that horses introduced by the Spanish more than 500 years ago were a different species than those horses who existed in North America prior to their mysterious disappearance approximately 10,000 years ago. However, mitochondrial DNA analysis of fossil remains indicates that *E. caballus*, the "modern" horse, is genetically identical to *E. lambei*, the most recent equine species to evolve in North America more than 1.7 million years ago. Hence, it can plausibly be argued that the Spanish actually "reintroduced" a native species, one which evolved on this continent and which has adapted and flourished both biologically and ecologically since its reintroduction. Interestingly, some scientists question the theory that all horses became extinct 10,000 years ago. They are only now beginning to analyze fossil remains that may eventually support this hypothesis.

Moreover, simply because horses were domesticated before being released is biologically inconsequential. Observing horses in the wild demonstrates just how quickly domesticated behavioral and morphological traits fall off. According to Dr. Patricia Fazio, "The key element in describing an

animal as a native species is (1) where it originated; and (2) whether or not it co-evolved with its habitat.” By virtue of their evolutionary history, biology and behavior, these animals are native wildlife. In addition, the 1971 WFHBA rightfully recognized them as an “integral part of the natural system of the public lands.”

 [Wild Horses as Native North American Wildlife](#) - Compiled by Jay F. Kirkpatrick, Ph.D. and Patricia M. Fazio, Ph.D. ([PDF version](#))

MYTH: Ranchers depend upon livestock grazing for their livelihood and wild horses and burros are creating an undue hardship on their operations.

FACT: While some small family ranchers do depend upon livestock for their primary source of income, the top grazing permits on our public lands in terms of numbers of livestock are held by corporate interests including the Hilton Family Trust, Anheuser-Busch, Inc., Nevada First Corp., and Metropolitan Life Co. In 1992, the General Accounting Office reported that just 16 percent of the approximately 20,000 public lands grazing permittees controlled more than 76.2 percent of forage available on BLM lands and most of these were either very wealthy individuals or big corporations. These wealthy corporate interests are much more concerned with paper stock than livestock, and with preserving their tax write-offs than a way of life. For the most part, removing wild horses and burros translates into just one more form of corporate welfare.

Studies indicate that most ranchers are choosing to diversify their sources of income. Today, less than 3% of our nation’s beef is produced on public rangelands. Ranching on both public and private lands accounts for less than 0.5% of all income by Western residents. In 1994, the Department of the Interior concluded that the elimination of all public lands grazing would result in the loss of only 0.1% of the West’s total employment. Changing times and demographics, not a small number of wild horses and burros, are responsible for the decline of the ranching industry’s importance in the West. The time has come to help wild horses and burros and to assist ranchers who want to voluntarily transition from a profession that is taking its toll on their pocketbooks.

MYTH: Without the federal grazing program assistance, ranchers would be unable to carry on a cherished family tradition and way of life.

FACT: Small family ranchers, just as small family farmers, have far more to fear from corporate interests than they do from responsible federal lands management policy. In fact, about 70% of cattle producers in the West own all the land they operate and do not rely on public lands grazing whatsoever. It can reasonably be argued that those ranchers who benefit from ridiculously cheap public lands grazing fees and other government subsidies associated with federal grazing permits have a distinct advantage over those who do not. Many of these ranchers who now fancy themselves as modern day “cattle barons” are millionaires and billionaires who made their fortunes in other businesses – e.g., Texas oilman, Oscar Wyatt, Jr. former chairman of Coastal Corp., the late McDonald’s French fries supplier John Simplot, and Mary Hewlett Jaffe, daughter of William Hewlett of Hewlett-Packard fame. The top 10 percent of public lands grazing permit holders control a striking 65 percent of all livestock on BLM lands and 49 percent on FS lands. The bottom 50 percent of public lands grazing permit holders control just 7 percent of livestock on BLM lands and 3 percent on FS lands.

Because public lands grazing allotments require ownership of private base property and wealthy individuals and corporations own more private property (i.e., base property), they wind up with more federal grazing allotments. Hence, these wealthy operations benefit from numerous taxpayer subsidies, while small family operations struggle to make ends meet. These “cattle barons” and corporations are increasingly buying out small ranching operations -- acres at a time. With rising operating costs and mounting debts, most small family ranchers are looking for work outside the ranch and a way out of ranching.

Some ranchers have expressed an interest in a proposal that would provide for their needs as they transition into other lines of work. If a rancher voluntarily relinquishes his/her federal grazing permit, the government would compensate the permittee \$175 per animal unit month (the amount of forage necessary to graze one cow and calf for one month). Not only would such an arrangement help ranchers and be a huge cost savings to taxpayers (see last myth), but it would also allow forage to be reallocated to wildlife including wild horses and burros.

MYTH: Removed horses and burros are adopted to loving homes through the government’s “Adopt a Horse or Burro Program.”

FACT: While the BLM has an obligation to ensure that the persons adopting wild horses and burros are “qualified” adopters, many people do not fully understand the responsibility and commitment that are required to care for an adopted animal, thus setting the stage for failed adoptions. Rigorous screening of potential adopters, education and monitoring are critical to the success of any adoption. Sadly, the BLM has failed in all of these areas. In 1997, the *Associated Press* uncovered enormous and egregious abuse within the adoption program, including the revelation that many individuals were adopting large numbers of wild horses only to turn around and make sizable profits by selling them for slaughter. To make matters worse, *The New York Times* reported on a Justice Department investigation that revealed that BLM had a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy on this issue, and that in fact many employees were well aware that adopters intended to sell horses for slaughter after receiving title. Only after being sued by wild horse advocates did the BLM agree to adopt measures to stem the tide of horses going to slaughter, but even then, countless horses fell through the cracks.

Of immediate concern is an amendment to the WFHBA that was slipped into the Interior Appropriations bill in the last Congressional session, requiring horses 10 years-of-age or older or those who have not been adopted after three attempts to be sold at auction without limitation. Such “sale authority” will open the floodgates of wild horses being sold to slaughter for profit. More than 8,000 wild horses may immediately wind up on the dinner plates in fancy overseas restaurants, and countless more will follow unless legislation is swiftly enacted to repeal this ill-conceived amendment. [H.R. 1018](#), introduced by Congressman Nick Rahall (D-WV) and Congressman Ed Whitfield (R-KY) in the House of Representatives to restore the slaughter prohibition for wild horses and burros. [H.R. 503](#), the Prevention of Equine Cruelty Act, reintroduced by House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers (D-MI) and Representative Dan Burton (R-IN) and in the Senate by Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) and veterinarian and Senator John Ensign (R-NV) as [S. 727](#) will ensure that no horse meets this appalling fate.

The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act and its legislative history make it clear that Congress, with overwhelming public support, intended for wild horses and burros to be protected in the wild, and removed only when necessary, and if removed, guaranteed humane treatment. They were never to be sold for slaughter.

Myth: With thousands of wild horses and burros awaiting adoption, the program is too costly and the only solution is to either sell or destroy “excess” animals who haven’t been adopted or are deemed “unadoptable.”

FACT: In 2001, the BLM adopted a reckless strategy to reduce the numbers of wild horses and burros on public lands by more than half by the year 2005, without any environmental review whatsoever. Up to that point in time, adoptions had kept pace with removals. Increased removals resulted in a backlog of animals awaiting adoption. Many animals were automatically shipped to long-term holding facilities and never even put up for adoption. With more than 20,000 animals languishing in holding facilities, costs for the inflated number of removals and the animals’ care have mounted – all directly attributable to BLM’s own misguided strategy. BLM’s FY 2005 budget for administering the program was \$39 million.

However, if the BLM were genuinely interested in fiscal responsibility, the agency would provide the public with a detailed analysis of the full costs of administering its livestock grazing program. A recent analysis of the budget records concluded that the net **direct** loss (calculated as the Congressional Appropriations for the program less fee receipts to the Treasury) of the livestock program was at least \$72 million for the BLM and \$52 million for the FS; the full costs are likely to be three to four times these amounts. However, with the multiple taxpayer subsidies ranchers receive ranging from below-market-value grazing fees to fire and weed control to predator and “pest” control to range improvements, to price supports, to the regular removal of wild horses and burros, etc., it is certain that the agency loses hundreds of millions of dollars each year. Removing livestock instead of wild horses and burros would indeed be the most fiscally responsible action the agency could take.

Please cosponsor S. 1579, the Restore our American Mustang Act. For more information contact Chris Heyde at (202) 337-2332 or visit www.awionline.org