

MANAGING WILD HORSES AND BURROS



Prior to passage of the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (the Act), horses and burros that roamed the West were largely managed by ranchers. Years of political campaigning resulted in passage and implementation of the Act, which still governs management of these equines today.

Like so many other legislative initiatives of the era, the Act has failed to keep pace with the realities of the day. Today, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have authority to manage horses under the Act, but are limited not only by outdated language but by distinct, harmful legislative intervention. As a result of this series of missteps, horse populations now far exceed the capacity of the rangeland to provide forage and water for them and the wildlife that depend on these same resources.

Horses and burros are managed in Herd Management Areas (HMAs) identified by the BLM and USFS. These areas are evaluated for how many horses the landscape and natural resources can sustain, which leads the agency to develop the Appropriate Management Level (AML) for that given area.

OVERPOPULATION AND RANGE DAMAGE

On-range populations are estimated to exceed 100,000 horses, and are able to double every four or five years. The vast majority of HMAs are critically overpopulated, sometimes more than five to seven times AML. These densely-populated herds overgraze native grasses, negatively impact soil health, and drive wildlife away from water resources.

In addition to the threat of starvation and dehydration from depleted natural resources, these overpopulated herds also are subject to inbreeding, birth defects, and a host of other welfare issues that occur as a direct result of poor management.



SOLUTIONS

Ranchers, horse lovers, and government officials all want healthy horses and healthy rangelands, but solutions are far from simple. That is why PLC partnered with ASPCA, Return to Freedom, the National Horse and Burro Rangeland Management Coalition, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and others to develop a comprehensive solution: The Path Forward.

The Path Forward Coalition focuses on increased funding for emergency removals of horses from critical HMAs, increased use of fertility controls, range restoration, and developing more robust plans for off-range holding facilities. The Coalition effectively secured additional funding in FY2020, FY2021, and is requesting additional funding for FY2022. Continued investment by Congress and the Coalition is the only way to protect these natural resources.

Intervention is critical to ensure these rangelands are healthy long into the future – both for horses, and for the wide variety of people and animals who depend on our natural resources.

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