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1. WILD HORSES: Nevada refuge plan would cull herds by 90 percent

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Saying that free-roaming mustangs and burros are destroying the ecosystem of the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Nevada, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this week released a draft environmental assessment for a management plan that would cut the number of animals from over 1,600 to between 100 and 200.

However, wild horse advocates question FWS's population counts and assumptions about the nature of overpopulation in the 500,000 acre wildlife refuge. They claim the agency is simply trying to eradicate the animals over time, using inhumane roundup techniques that result in the deaths of young colts and may eventually lead to the wholesale slaughter of animals. FWS, on the other hand, says that its intent is to place horses and burros that are removed from the ranges for adoption, with special protections to guard against slaughters.



Wild horse advocates decry the use of helicopters during roundups of herds meant to reduce populations, as in the photo from the June 2006 gather at the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada. Photo by Flora Steffan. Courtesy of American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign.

The issue, part of a decades-long struggle between public lands managers and those who esteem wild horses as iconic symbols of the West, is also being played out on Bureau of Land Management properties in 10 Western states, where some 30,000 horses and burros roam freely on BLM land, while another 30,000 are held in federal corrals because they cannot be easily auctioned or adopted.

Paul Steblein, FWS project leader at the Sheldon NWR, told *Land Letter* that the goal of the plan -- to maintain a "manageable level" of 75 to 125 wild horses and 30 to 60 burros -- was actually set in the 1980s, but that limited budgets and emphasis on other refuge areas, allowed the herds to grow. While the combined population in Sheldon was only about 400 in the early 1990s, it has been growing by as much as 23 percent per year, with over 1,600 animals now on the refuge.

He contrasted the desert refuge with the open and grassy plains of the West, saying that "virtually all aspects of the ecosystem are adversely affected. Songbirds, fish, vegetation, soil impaction, small mammals and amphibians -- all are affected by horses and burros in an adverse way."

FWS contends that the animals are non-native to the area, which is supposed to preserve native species. "We should be removing them completely from the refuge," Steblein said.

However, the animals have a strong and vocal constituency in groups like the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign (AWHPC), a coalition of some 40 groups. Virginie Parant, a Los Angeles-based campaign director for AWHPC, countered that the federal agencies overstate the overpopulation and degradation problems in order to justify their attempts to reduce free-roaming animals. "These are just the usual arguments that BLM and FWS use. We can take each argument one by one and debunk each of them," she told *Land Letter*. "FWS just doesn't want to manage them. Their idea is to remove them all ultimately."

AWHPC says that the most reliable population growth study was conducted in 1982, finding a 10 percent per year growth among the wild horses. "Twenty-three percent is a very, very huge estimate," Parant said. Also, studies of land degradation do not separate out the effect of cattle grazing, which was allowed on the refuge until the 1990s.

She doubted what she called "the premise of overpopulation," saying that there is currently about one horse per 300 acres of refuge land, but the management plan is trying to reduce that to less than one for every 5,000 acres.

In addition, she argued that the horses were indeed native to North America, even if modern herds descended from animals

imported by European settlers.

"We need an accurate calculation of population counts and to let the herds sustain themselves at genetically viable numbers," Parant said. "If there is overpopulation in certain areas, use contraception judiciously."

The current management plan for wild horses on public lands is not sound management, she said, but is promoted by grazing cattle owners, energy developers and other special interest groups. "It's a disservice to the American people," she said.

The group is especially critical of the Sheldon NWR roundup from 2006, which employed private helicopters to stampede horses into holding pens. Parant called it "absolutely disastrous" because it was scheduled "right at the height of foaling season in June." In addition, several colts were trampled, or left behind as mares were herded off for adoption. About 330 horses and burros were removed from the refuge last year, and over 700 the year before.

In some cases, the agents employed by FWS to find adoption homes for the horses were "suspicious," Parant claimed, and may have sold them to slaughterhouses. "We're still trying to track many of the horses."

FWS officials, however, downplayed the accusations. While six colts died during the gathering, two were from natural causes, the agency told reporters last year.

Steblein defended the program. "We have a very strong perspective. Any horses or burros we pull off the refuge are sent to adoption. Any way we can avoid them going to slaughter." FWS has contracted a Tennessee agency to find homes for the animals, with great success, he said.

However, one adoption subcontractor, Gary Graham of Los Lunas, New Mexico, said he had 52 Sheldon horses last year but has stopped working with FWS to find homes for the horses. "It's more trouble than it's worth," he said.

Different rules for refuges

FWS's wildlife refuges are not covered by the main statute governing federal management of wild horses, the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, or the Dec. 2004 amendments -- the so-called Burns Amendment -- that allowed BLM to sell animals that are over 10 years old, or have been passed over for adoption at least three times.

The BLM sales program in 2005 was halted for a while after revelations that several animals ended up being killed or traded ([Land Letter](#), April 28, 2005).

The sales program has been targeted for elimination by Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va) who heads the House Natural Resources Committee. Rahall and Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.) have sponsored H.B. 249 that would end the commercial sale wild horses and burros by BLM.

The bill, approved by voice vote during a March committee hearing, responds to an amendment from former Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) in the fiscal 2005 omnibus appropriations bill, which overturned what had been a 34-year ban on slaughtering the animals. The amendment opened up the program to potential slaughter and sale for meat markets, primarily for Belgium, France and Japan ([E&E Daily](#), March 8).

BLM spokesman Tom Gorey said, "We've always screened buyers. We do not sell to slaughterhouses." In 2005, he said, about 41 animals had been resold or traded, causing the agency to intervene to take back as many as 50 others. Since then, there are additional requirements for the adoption program, including a one-year hold on transferring title to the animals put up for adoption, until the agency can verify they are well kept.

BLM has over 80 adoption events scheduled this year, including two Internet adoption periods in May and July.

Since 1973, he said, over 215,000 animals have been adopted out, while 2,200 have been sold since the 2004 law revisions. Still, the total population on BLM land is more than double what is considered a sustainable level. "We adopt 6,000 per year, but we need to remove 10,000 from the range," Gorey said. "The herds double in size about every four years."

In fiscal 2006, ending Sept 30, BLM spent \$36.8 million on its wild horse and burro program, with about \$19 million of that for holding horses in short- and long-term facilities.

BLM removed 9,926 animals from the range in 2006, and the fiscal 2007 program calls for roundup of about 6,800 in all. Between now and Sept. 30 there are about three dozen scheduled roundups that would remove 2,923 horses and burros from BLM and FWS lands. The biggest of the year took place in January in the Adobe Town region of Wyoming, involving the roundup of some 1,600 horses, with over 1,100 removed from the ranges.



More than 60,000 wild horses and burros live on federal lands in 10 Western states, including some 30,000 free-roaming animals and an equivalent number in holding for adoption or sale. Photo courtesy of BLM.