

The Bureau of Land Management and Mustangs of the West

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***Calico Mountains herd in the Mojave Desert;
Photo Credit: Carrol Abel***

The past few years have been littered with lawsuits and problems for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The wild horses and burros of the West are reaching soaring populations, which poses a problem for the users of the land. Grazing cattle, timber lands, or mining sites occupy much of the BLM's land. Critics argue that the quickly growing herds are detrimental to the land, yet there is no room to safely displace the horses.

Interestingly enough, some people purport that the most humane way to help these equines is to euthanize and sterilize them. If not, these proponents claim that the horses will starve or damage grazing lands and wildlife, including endangered or threatened species. In other words, the equines' rapidly increasing population will pose a threat either to themselves, or other wildlife.

Is moving these horses a viable answer? The "1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act authorizes the agency to move wild horses and burros off ranges to sustain the health of public lands" (Rogers 1). While it is true that horses are rougher on the vegetation of the land than cattle are, provisions must be made for wild animals. Unlike cattle, wild horses do not have the opportunity to return to the safety of a ranch. No one is helping the numerous horses and burros; thus, they should at least be given the space to care for themselves. Since wild equines occupy only 11% of the BLM's land, there is more than enough room to host them, if land is allotted appropriately (Gorey and Lutterman 2).

The BLM's current population control methods include round ups, putting younger horses up for adoption, euthanizing several thousand horses that are not adopted, or (a newer method) sterilizing members of herds to prevent further reproduction. The round up methods are extremely dangerous, leaving the remaining horses in a volatile state. Helicopters fly dangerously close to the animals, and ground riders herd the horses toward large pens. Furthermore, these methods have not worked to stabilize the population. There continues to



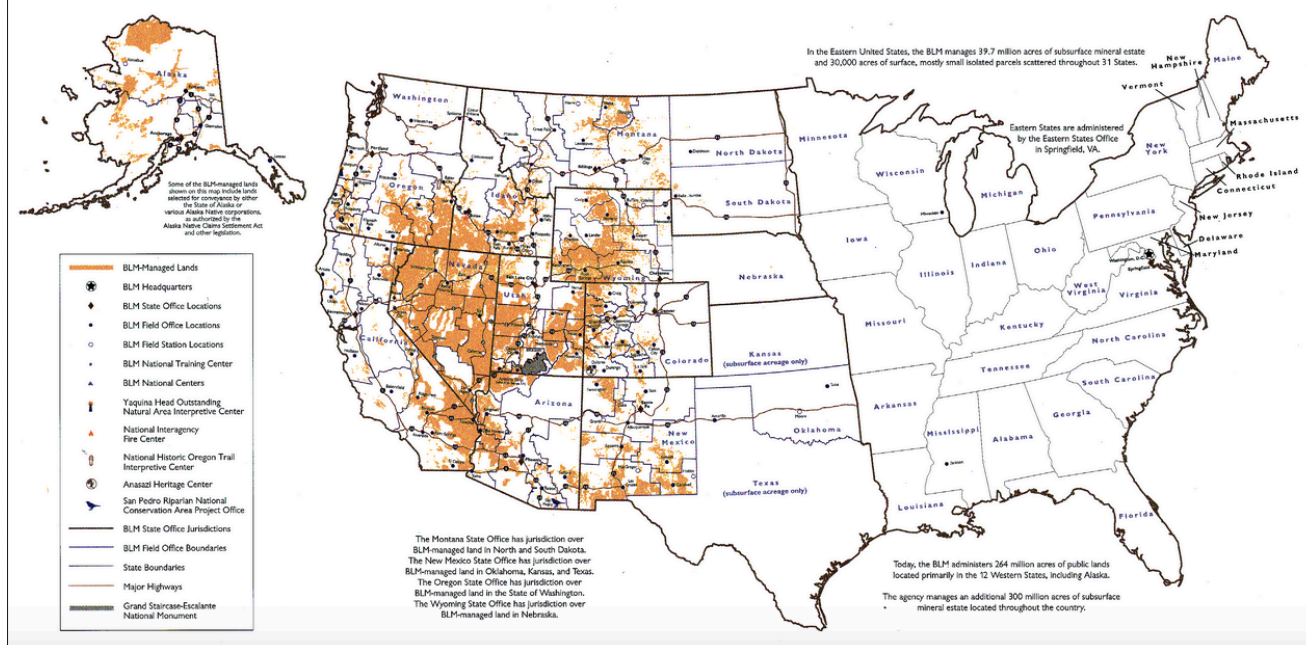
***BLM Roundup with Mounted Rider and Helicopter;
Photo Credit: Phil Schofield***

be problems with the BLM round-ups; thousands of horses are in captivity, and cannot be cared for. “The BLM has rounded up and removed thousands more wild horses each year than can be adopted, resulting in the stockpiling of more horses in holding facilities (50,000) than are left free on the range (<32,000)” (American Wild Horse Preservation).

The sterilization and contraceptive techniques have been problematic in their own right. Research on possible contraceptive options has been ongoing since the 1970s, thus it seems like a viable proposition. Several large herds in Nevada (greater than 50 head) have been subject to experimentation with these proposed solutions. This has not been measured to have any success as of yet; “However, no free ranging western horse herds have yet been managed at the population level with contraceptives” (Ardus 14). Not only has the outcome not yet been proven, it has been shown that these injections of hormonal sterilant can be costly to the animal. According to Mathew Ardus, in his book on the BLM’s management of wild horses, foaling times in treated herds shift to summer or fall, capturing and injecting the lead stallions each year

is costly and difficult, long-term effects remained unknown, and the agent could enter the food chain (10). The attempts to cull the horses could damage the surrounding ecosystem more than the horses ever could themselves. Damaged vegetation from round-ups, injected chemicals possibly entering the food chain, and the absence of an essential part of the plains environment are only a few of the possible consequences from removing the equines.

Public Lands Managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)



***Map of the distribution and size of BLM land (orange shows BLM-Managed Lands);
Photo Credit: BLM***

Clearly, the issue of the BLM not allocating enough resources to support the horses and burros is not a valid reason for pushing them out. The BLM covers an expansive amount of land, totaling 247.3 million acres, with more potentially coming from federal grants. If more land can, and will be acquired, why is the BLM not allocating this immediately to the starving equines of the West?

A possible reason that land is not granted from the government to the equines is that the majority of that land goes to farmers. Farmers and ranchers acquire much control and power over Western culture, as they are granted significantly more rights than any other profession in the Western region (Ardus 24). The BLM gives much of its land to farming, leaving a meager 11% to wild horses (Gorey and Lutterman 2). There is a reason for this, though; most ranchers will fight for their rights to put their livestock on a piece of land. A group of ranchers in Idaho “have sued the agency over its management of the animals, contending the horses, and not the cattle that they grazed on public lands, were responsible for environmental threats to endangered steelhead habitat” (Clevenger 10). This is far from the truth, but when endangered species are brought into the discussion, decisions will often rule in favor of their protection. Thus, these arguments are merely an obstructionist claim in order to turn the BLM in favor of the ranchers. This only dampens the hope of ever increasing the range of the mustangs. Without excess land to turn to, the next option will have to be explored; adoptions.

One of the proposed solutions to the overpopulation is to round up the horses and burros for adoption, even though fewer are adopted each year. The data show an extreme drop; “Adoptions fell from 5,701 in fiscal 2005 to 3,706 in fiscal 2008” (Lewis 2). Furthermore, these particular adoption systems are something the BLM does not want to continue using. “The agency says it can’t maintain the system under its present budget... Last year, holding costs topped \$27 million, or about three-fourths of the BLM’s \$36.2 million total budget for the program. It seeks additional funding from Congress, but whether it will get the amount... is questionable” (Lewis 3).

There are countless unchecked problems that all trickle into one large issue for the BLM: too many animals. Yet, it is their job as a federal entity to manage this with care and humane

actions. Do they? “According to BLM data, since 2002, about 2,000 wild horse whose legal titles were obtained by private citizens either through adoption or purchase were slaughtered. During that same period, another 90 wild horses whose title still belonged to BLM were retrieved from slaughterhouses by BLM and by wild horse groups (United States 46).” This is a serious issue. Why are horses being inhumanely killed when they are ready to go to homes? This is part of the inconclusiveness of the BLM.

Knowing that the BLM has turned to slaughter in the past shows that there needs to be a written agreement of how to proceed with these herds. Unless specified by the federal government, the BLM will take the shortest and least expensive method to cull the herds. Just this past September, “the Bureau of Land Management’s National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board recommended that the Bureau euthanize or sell “without limitation” excess “unadoptable” horses and burros in the BLM’s off-range corrals and pastures (Rogers 10).” These horses need to be protected by an entity larger than the BLM.

Now what is the BLM’s response to all these accusations? They detail their efforts to combat the overpopulation, but the majority of the figures simply show the extent to which these animals have continued to breed and exacerbate the problem. The Appropriate Management Level (AML) is the number that the BLM has calculated to be appropriate for the horses and burros to thrive in balance with other public land resources and uses. This number is 26,715. The government’s “Quick Facts” page for the BLM states “The current estimated on-range wild horse and burro population (as of March 1, 2016) is 67,027, a 15 percent increase over the 2015 estimate of 58,150. That means the current West-wide on-range population exceeds AML by more than 40,000” (Gorey and Lutterman 2).

The BLM also outlines data on the current fertility-control methods, and their effectiveness on the current population. These include statistics on Population Growth-Suppression Treatments. Tom Gorey and Jason Lutterman, the two contacts designated on this sector of the BLM, describe “The currently available fertility control vaccine, known as *porcine zona pellucida* (PZP), is limited in the duration of its effectiveness – a one-year formulation...that must be hand-injected into a captured wild horse. A second formulation of PZP can be deployed via ground-darting, but is also effective for up to only one year” (Gorey and Lutterman 2). Gorey and Lutterman describe several problems with the fertility-control methods: the nature of these formulations is not very efficient or viable due to the skittish nature of the horses, as well as the massive amount of land that would need to be covered in order to find them.

How did the BLM decide that PZP would be the method that they would use? In 2011, the BLM “commissioned the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences to conduct an independent technical evaluation of the science, methodology, and technical decision-making approaches of the Wild Horse and Burro Program” (Committee 2). Among their many duties was to evaluate the methods of fertility-control based on various factors, such as efficacy, potential physiological and behavioral side effects, or duration of effect. After analyzing several methods, the best approaches were judged to be the two types of vaccines (PZP included), and chemical vasectomies. Though, the “committee noted that no method existed that did not affect physiology or behavior” (Committee 2).

Finally, the BLM detailed the number of horses and burros that they needed to “remove”, or place into holding pens each year. The BLM claims that only 3,819 horses and burros were removed in the fiscal year. Forty-five thousand, six-hundred-sixty-one total horses

and burros live in short-term corrals or long-term pastures (as of August 2016). These numbers are startling. How can there be this many horses living in holding pens? How could this be a clean and sanitary situation for them?

These efforts would at least look plausible if the BLM reported its numbers correctly, or executed the measures properly. However, the true consequences of a roundup are detailed in “The Reality of Roundups”. According to the AWHP, the reality is evident as the horses and burros are driven into the holding pens;

Closely-knit family bands are broken up; foals may be separated from their mothers, trampled, or sometimes, too exhausted to keep up with the herd, left behind to fend for themselves out on the range; stallions, suddenly crammed in close quarters, will fight. At the holding site, BLM makes “liberal” use of its euthanasia policy: horses with physical defects such as club-feet are euthanized, including adults that had managed to thrive for years in the wild... (Nock 3).

None of this would be expressed in the BLM’s numbers, because the deaths and trauma suffered due to round-ups are attributed to natural causes. The American Wild Horse Preservation cites 2006 as an example; 21 horses were euthanized on site, yet a zero-mortality rate was reported for the round-up (4).

Perhaps if the BLM reported honest and accurate numbers, more could be done to counteract their under-handed actions by the federal government, or even by horse activist groups around the country. After reviewing all of these current methods, perhaps the best solution is staring us in the face: more land needs to be allotted for these equines, and less to the ranchers and their cattle.

Is it possible for the BLM to provide more public land for these horses? It costs more to keep the horses held in pens, and to round them up, than it would to release more land. The amount of money it takes to maintain cattle grazing lands is taking up much of federal budget; “The Federal Livestock Grazing Program costs American taxpayers \$123 million yearly. Removing the cattle would actually save taxpayers money” (Winkler 3). This seems easy enough to interpret: taxpayer money has been going to cattle grazing on the horses’ potential land. If the cattle’s land was reduced, so would tax rates. Releasing grazing land to horses would benefit even the individual taxpayer.

Now, if cattle remain on the BLM land, and ranchers continue to receive tax money for the livestock, the BLM would be losing money; “Planned helicopter removal of wild horses will cost nearly 10 times more than the revenues received from livestock grazers” (Winkler 4). Removing the wild horses will put the federal entity in a deficit; even the revenue from grazing land would not cover the removal expenses. Money is a large factor into the care of the horses. Despite the \$123 million in revenue the BLM would receive from taxes, the helicopter roundups and relocation of the wild horses would eat up any chance of not losing money. Even with the land provided, the herds should be left to manage themselves. They have been self-moderating for years, long before it was commonplace to round up and manage wild horses in the mid-twentieth century.

Though the BLM describes wild horses as having “virtually no natural predators”, herds do manage themselves through natural selection. Over time the herds will reach a carrying capacity, or the maximum amount of life that a certain plot of land can support, and nature will run its course. Human interference is not needed as direly as the BLM dictates. Additional land could be given to the BLM through the U.S. Department of the Interior, or better, it could be re-

allocated to the wild horses. This means less acreage would be given for mineral mine fields, mines, timber forests, and cattle to graze on. The remaining acreage would go towards conservation efforts and space for these magnificent wild horses to not only survive, but thrive as well.

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Research Strategy

Throughout the early stages of this paper, I found myself constantly searching through many scholastic references and statistical reports that would provide only a part of what I was looking to research. Searching for the specific effects within such a massive amount of information was proving difficult. The Goucher College Library aided in my search for specificities, such as which control methods were implemented by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), in addition to the amounts of federal funding.

It would have taken much more time to put the works together had I not found sources such as the specific book on wild horses and their management, or a review of proposals on herd management submitted to the BLM, for instance. I would not have had access to these materials had they not been available through the Goucher College Library. Due to said materials, I was able to retrieve relevant websites and articles that provided a new, current view of this issue. With these pertinent sources in hand, I was able to put together a research plan.

Before undertaking this project, I had considered the proper way to begin a research paper as collecting any and all information about the subject, and then narrowing down the data into usable bits. Throughout this process, though, I found that method to be a rather tedious and unpredictable strategy. Researching is not a linear process, thus employing quite specific keywords to search for sources, such as "mustangs" and "PZP fertilization" was quite helpful. If my search yielded no results, I would attempt the usage of different but similar words, and look for the main idea of the source to reflect the main idea in my paper. In the end, I felt that my research ideas and strategies produced an effective result.