



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

FERAL HORSES: GET THE FACTS



The population of feral horses has exploded in recent years with nearly 70,000 horses on rangelands and in corrals and pastures. Photo credit: Jim Stephenson

America's free-ranging horses are a beloved western icon – and a potentially destructive non-native species that threatens native species and their habitats.

In the late 1500s, Spanish explorers introduced domestic horses to North America. Over time, some of those horses escaped their owners or were turned out, creating a population of feral horses. In recent decades, the population on public Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands has soared from 25,000 in 1971 to 69,000 today. More than half of the feral horses – about 37,000 – range freely on public land, while 32,000 are maintained in government-run corrals and pastures at a cost of about \$40 million annually.

Current management practices are severely restricted by popular opinion, which has failed to consider the devastating impact of feral horses on native species and natural ecosystems or the growing and substantial cost to taxpayers.

The Wildlife Society (TWS) hopes to educate the public about this increasingly critical problem. Founded in 1937 and representing over 9,000 wildlife professionals, TWS is committed to science-based policy and the highest standards of scientific integrity. As an advocate of science-based management of feral horses, TWS has compiled answers to some common questions about this issue, including a side-by-side comparison of past and proposed management approaches.



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What's the difference between wild and feral horses?

Wild animals' ancestors have never been domesticated – modified by selective breeding – whereas feral animals' ancestors were once domesticated but are now free-ranging in the absence of human care. **The “wild” horses in America are actually feral**, the descendants of domestic horses introduced to North America by the Spanish in the 1500s.

Didn't horses live in North America thousands of years ago, and doesn't that make them native?

Although many now-extinct horse species evolved in North America, modern feral horses are descendants of horses that were domesticated in Europe. There are similarities between certain genes in modern horses and fossil horses from North America, but geneticists do not believe that they are identical or members of the same species.¹ Horses were absent from North America for 10,000 years after going extinct during the Pleistocene. Since then, the western United States has become more arid and many of the horses' natural predators, like the American lion and saber-toothed cat, have disappeared, changing the ecosystem and the role horses play.² In Beever & Herrick 2006, the authors state that, “horses should be considered ecologically as part of a novel disturbance regime in the Great Basin (rather than as a native species).”³ **Feral horses are not a natural part of the existing western ecosystem.**

How do feral horses affect native habitats and wildlife?

Free-roaming herds currently range across 18.6 million hectares.⁴ Feral horses damage landscapes by trampling vegetation, hard-packing the soil, and over-grazing.⁵ Areas inhabited by feral horses tend to have fewer plant species, less plant cover, and more invasive cheatgrass, and this can have a pervasive influence on the entire ecosystem.⁶ The small reptiles and mammals that depend on burrows and brush cover to survive and breed



Feral horses herds trample foliage and degrade rangelands.
Credit: Jim Stephenson

are less abundant in horse-occupied sites (except for deer mice, a species known to thrive in disturbed landscapes). Desert snakes, lizards, and amphibians occupy a wide range of ecological and trophic niches, and often serve as a link between trophic levels. If their populations are severely reduced or disappear entirely, larger ecosystem simplifications may follow.⁷ Another study found that bighorn sheep, a native ungulate whose populations have been in decline, avoid water sources when horses are using them.⁸ Feral herds aren't restricted to lower elevations like cattle, and often range to higher elevations to graze. That means that when horses are added to an ecosystem, little habitat is left undisturbed, from the grassy plains to steeper, rockier areas.

What can BLM do to manage the feral horse population?

A variety of management policies have been used since the 1970s. Efforts are made to adopt out the horses, and



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under the Wild Horses and Burros Act, it is legal to euthanize unadoptable horses. However, this option isn't used, and horses that aren't adopted by the public are held in temporary or permanent enclosures. **The number of animals removed from ranges now far outnumbers the number adopted or sold** as demand for feral horses has dwindled. In 1998 all but 14% of horses offered for adoption found homes. In 2008, the most recent year for which BLM data is available, nearly a third of those horses were not adopted.⁹ Secretary Salazar's new plan proposes fertility control and moving some captive herds to the Midwest or East. However, it remains to be seen if this plan will be effective in controlling feral horse populations. **BLM and the Department of Interior must work with wildlife professionals and others to develop a plan to manage feral horses in an ecologically responsible manner.** Lethal management options may need to be considered if BLM's and DOI's new plans for population control fail to curb feral horse numbers: Western rangelands cannot continue to sustain an ever-expanding population of feral horses.

How much does it cost the taxpayers to support feral horses in captivity?

The total cost of rounding up and maintaining feral horses has been rising rapidly, from \$38.8 million in FY07 to \$63.9 million in FY10. President Obama's budget request for the BLM in FY11 includes \$75.7 million for the program and \$42.5 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to buy land for a preserve in the East or Midwest. The number of short-term holding facilities rose from 14 in 2001 to 24 in 2008, while the number of long-term holding facilities has increased from 1 in 1988 to 11 in 2008. The cost of these holding facilities is \$34 million out of the total FY10 budget of \$63.9 million.¹⁰ Costs are projected to increase in the coming years if the program does not change,¹¹ especially as adoption rates are slowing.¹² Given continuing feral horse population growth, looming federal deficits, budget reductions, and other priority needs for conservation, this program is likely unsustainable.

Are the round-up methods currently used to remove horses humane?

When the BLM determines that rangeland is deteriorating due to overpopulation, it removes feral horses by herding them into holding pens, usually with the use of helicopters. The animals sometimes run for long distances, and animal welfare activists have raised concerns about such treatment. However, round-ups do not seem to have any negative effects on feral horses. In one study, horses that were herded, but not captured, showed the same reproductive success and daily activities as horses that never experienced a round-up.¹³ BLM reports less than 1 percent mortality directly caused by round-ups.¹⁴ These findings suggest that **round-ups are a humane way to remove horses from rangelands and the only viable method of population control if lethal measures are not considered** as a management option.

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A Side-by-side Comparison of Three Policies Used or Proposed to Manage Feral Horses and Burros

	Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act Public Law 92-195	Restore our American Mustangs Act	Salazar's Proposal
Status	Passed in 1971; still in effect.	House passed 7/17/09; referred to committee in Senate.	Proposed in 2009; not yet implemented.
Removal	Helicopters and motorized vehicles can be used.	Sick/injured horses, those doing damage to native wildlife, or excess after exhausting all other options can be removed.	Some horses removed and transported to reserves in the East and Midwest.
Sales/Adoption	Limit 4 horses/year for any individual. Cannot be sold dead or alive for commercial processing.	Cannot be held for more than 6 months in temporary corral. Cannot be sold dead or alive for commercial processing.	Partner with private organizations to promote adoption, and make requirements more flexible.
Euthanasia	Old, sick, lame, or unadoptable animals can be humanely euthanized. Euthanasia of unadoptable horses is legal but not practiced.	Only fatally sick or injured animals can be euthanized—revokes right to euthanize unadopted horses.	Not addressed.
Contraception	Can be used to achieve desired population levels.	Supports research and development on fertility control.	Aggressive fertility control, sex ratio manipulation, and introduction of non-reproducing herds.
Rangeland	Cannot be moved to public lands where they did not previously exist.	Available land must be at least equal to 1971 level. Lifts restrictions on moving animals onto public lands where they previously did not exist.	Move surplus animals to pens in the East/Midwest. Partner with private organizations to purchase and maintain additional rangeland.

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