

WILD HORSES AND FEDERAL TAX DOLLARS

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A paper submitted

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for

AEEC 522 Economics of Public Expenditure

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Las Cruces, New Mexico

November 2008

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The wild mustangs that roam the American west are horses descended from those brought to this country by Spanish explorers five centuries ago. These horses became a revered symbol of the Wild West and American freedom. Horses have been used for transportation, farming, mail delivery, war, meat and have been an integral part of United States history. At work and at play the horse has become a much-loved companion of the American public. Congress classifies horses as livestock (Ahern, et al., 2006), but the American public treats them more like pets.

While herds of wild mustangs still exist in the west today, no action was taken to protect these horses until the early 1950's. During the 1950's Velma B. Johnston, later nicknamed Wild Horse Annie, conducted her own research into how wild horses were rounded up by ranchers and hunters often referred to as "mustangers." Appalled by the inhumane treatment of the horses, Johnston began a grassroots campaign that primarily involved school children. Youngsters from across America sent letters to newspapers and legislators and attracted attention that outraged the public and made them aware of the issue. Newspapers published articles about the exploitation of the wild horses and burros and the Associated Press (1959) article, "Seldom has an issue touched such a responsive chord." Nevada Congressman Walter Baring (1959) introduced a bill prohibiting the use of motorized vehicles or aircrafts to hunt or harass wild horses on all public lands. The House of Representatives unanimously passed the bill, which became known as the Wild Horse Annie Act. (U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 2008)

The 1959 law did not include Johnston's recommendation that Congress begin a program to protect wild horses and burros (Gorey, Factsheet on Challenges Facing the

BLM in its Management of Wild Horses and Burros, 2008) Public interest and concern continued to increase, and with that came the realization that more federal action was needed. In response to the public outcry, the Senate unanimously passed the Wild Free Roaming and Burro Act in 1971. Under the act, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was charged with the protection, management, and control of wild horses and burros. The act was intended to ensure that healthy herds would thrive on healthy rangelands. One of the BLM's key responsibilities under the law was to determine the appropriate management levels of wild horses and burros on public lands. In 1976, the act was amended to allow officials or contractors to manage the animals by helicopter and motorized vehicles. In 1978, the act was amended further to authorize the BLM to euthanasia excess wild horses and burros for which an adoption demand by qualified individuals did not exist. (U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 2008)

In 1990, the U.S Government Accountability Office recommended that the BLM consider, for horses in long-term holding facilities, a variety of disposal options that included sterilization and euthanasia. Today, almost 20 years after the first long-term holding facility opened, with adoption demand declining and alternative disposal options still not being used, the BLM continued to open new long-term holding facilities to care for these unadoptable horses while the costs continued to escalate. (2008 GAO REPORT p. 62)

In 2004, the BLM was authorized to sell without limitation wild horses and burros that were either over 10 years of age or had been passed over for adoption at least three times. (2008 GAO Report, p.11) That meant that the BLM could sell the horses to individuals who planned to sell the horses for slaughter. Senator Burns (2006) the driving force behind the 2004 legislation said, horses are bought and sold like cattle. With an old lame horse you sell them to the slaughter house to recoup cost. (Brungardt,

2006) The BLM chooses not to destroy or sell excess horses because of public outcry concerns and congressional reaction. BLM has instead imposed limitations on the sale of excess animals in an effort to reduce the risk that animals purchased would be resold to slaughterhouses for profit. In 2005, BLM had buyers sign a “no slaughter” agreement. By not selling without limitation the BLM is out of compliance with the requirements of the law. (2008 GAO Report, p. 10, 60)

The BLM balances the needs of ranching, recreation and animal wildlife on public land. Of the 260 million such Western acres, about 35 million are home to free-roaming horses. Wild horses and burros have virtually no predators, and their herd size can double every three to four years. (Masibay, 2002) As a result, the BLM must remove thousands of animals from the range each year to control herd sizes. Currently, 33,000 (29,500 horses and 3,500 burros) roam BLM-managed rangelands in 10 Western states. (Gorey, Factsheet on Challenges Facing the BLM in its Management of Wild Horses and Burros, 2008 & Appendices A) While off the range as of June 2008, there are another 30,088 wild horses and burros that are fed and cared for at short-term (corrals) and long-term (pasture) holding facilities. (GAO Report, p.8 2008)

In fiscal year 2007, the BLM spent \$38.8 million on its wild horse and burro program. The cost for holding wild horses and burros in short term- (corrals) and long-term facilities (private lands) was \$21.9 million, meaning that holding costs accounted for more than half of what the BLM spent in Fiscal Year 2007 on its total wild horse and burro program. In fiscal year 2008, holding costs exceeded \$27 million, accounting for three-fourths of the FY 2008 Congressional Appropriation of about \$38 million for the BLM's total wild horse and burro program. This level of funding is not sufficient to support necessary removals from the range while maintaining lifetime holding facilities for older, unadopted animals. To continue its current removal and holding practices, the BLM would need \$77 million by 2012. This is the figure projected by the BLM. (Gorey,

Factsheet on Challenges Facing the BLM in its Management of Wild Horses and Burros, 2008)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The cost of keeping animals removed from western rangelands in holding facilities is rising and preventing the BLM from successfully managing other parts of the program, such as gathers and adoptions. The BLM cannot continue its current removal and holding practices under existing and projected budgets. In one year alone, from fiscal year 2007 to fiscal year 2008, energy costs for transportation and feed increased by 4 million. If the BLM does not control the off- the-range holding costs the program will continue to overwhelm the BLM budget. In 2008 the \$27 million expenditure represented in 2008 74% of the budget. (Gorey, Factsheet on Challenges Facing the BLM in its Management of Wild Horses and Burros, 2008)

When asked about the BLM costs, lifelong rancher Coleman (2008) said that the BLM figures were low and contended that the BLM had a tendency to underplay how bad the situation was and that the costs they presented were not a true reflection of the actual overall cost. The costs to counties, cities, and individuals to take care of damage was not reflected in the BLM figures. (Coleman, 2008)

Even though the law requires humane destruction or sale without limitation, the BLM cannot continue to care for animals off the range. The costs for maintaining horses off the range are overwhelming the budget. The BLM program is at a critical crossroads. (GAO report p.62)

The BLM could take no action, but should the BLM refrain from removing excess horses from the range, the horses' presence would impact the ecological balance on western rangelands. Overpopulation of herds would cause overgrazing of forage and lead to the eventual malnutrition and starvation of horses and burros. Overpopulation would cause damage to native vegetation and riparian areas and to wildlife areas,

increase soil erosion, and lower water quality. Maxine Shane (2002) of the Bureau of Land Management, reminded those interested that vegetation and water were finite resources that all the species had to share. If the mustangs were to overgraze or eat plants down, they might not re-grow. (Masibay, 2002 & Appendices B)

As Vice President of The Public Lands Council, Charles Coleman toured numerous Western ranches talking with ranchers regarding their problems on public lands, primarily to look at wild horse problems. Coleman found that overgrazing was a problem. Horses will destroy water systems and run off cattle if the rancher is feeding his livestock. A single horse needs 15 or 20 gallons of water a day. The cost is high to a rancher to maintain his/her infrastructure because of the damage horses do, the water they drink, and the amount of salt/mineral they eat. (Coleman, 2008)

The major problem with removing excess animals from public lands is what to do with them. In 1971, the BLM began an adoption program for wild mustangs, but there are not enough individuals available to adopt these horses. The horses are relatively inexpensive to adopt, with costs starting at \$15. (Appendices C) Since the adoption program started in 1971, the BLM has placed more than 235,700 wild horses and burros into private care. (GAO Report p.3)

Like the free roaming animals, all horses and burros in holding facilities are protected by the BLM under the Wild Horse Free-Roaming Horse and Burros Act. It is these horses in the holding facilities that are putting a major strain on the BLM's budget. Carrying for animals in captivity is expensive because of the price of feed, fuel, and transportation. Currently, animals placed in long-term facilities can live out the rest of their lives, which can range from 10 to 25 years depending on the age they enter the facility. (Masibay, 2002)

Coleman (2008) noted there was little knowledge about how many wild horses there are. No accurate census figures are available, which compounds the problem. (Coleman

2008) Accurate animal counts are critical to the BLM's ability to properly manage wild horses and burros, but according to the Government Accounting Office (2008), the BLM consistently undercounts the animals. When asked about the numbers on the range, Coleman contended that no one takes keeps track of the horses and that while the BLM was responsible for keeping track of the horses, the Bureau lacked staff. The BLM herds are counted or estimated every three to four years. Democratic Representative Nick Rahal of West Virginia (2008) also criticized the BLM for mismanaging the program, inability to administer the budget with any trace of fiscal responsibility. (McAllister, 2008)

According the Strategic Research, Plan Wild Horses & Burro Management (2003), the BLM claimed that inbreeding was rare in wild horses and in the wild horses carried little disease. (U.S. Geological Survey, Biological Resources Division & Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, October 2003 Revised March 2005) However, horses in long-term holding facilities are concentrated, and infectious diseases can spread rapidly through animals. Health care includes numerous inoculations against pathogens, hoof trimming, and de-worming. The animals are wild, and handling creates stress. Additionally, they may be injured during handling, transport, and treatment. The BLM's answer to these problems is to study optimal handling and healthcare practices. The support for this type of research is not economically feasible.

Central to the control of wild horse numbers have been programs that promote adoption. Ironically, that solution has become part of the problem. While a good deal of money is spent on it, a cost-benefit analysis shows that adoption as a solution is both inefficient and costly. Rancher Charles Coleman (2008) calls the adoption programs "great feel good programs" that do not come close to solving the problem because people do not adopt enough horses to make a significant difference. (Coleman 2008)

Because free ranging herds have the potential to double in size every four years, and the BLM now has over 30,000 horses in captivity, the federal government and the

public must work harder to plan for the current and projected expenditures of the wild horse program. Gorey (2008) observed that solving the problem was an emotional and controversial issue. The BLM has extensive mustang adoption programs available through the Internet along with several on site auctions that were scheduled across United States each month through September 2009. The BLM has devoted a great deal of time, resources, and planning to fostering adoptions for wild mustangs. While the BLM mission was to protect, control, and manage the wild horse population, the adoption numbers continued to decline yearly, from 5700 adoptions in 2005 to 4700 in 2007 and fewer than 4000 to date in 2008. The adoption numbers do not come close to matching the 30,000 horses that are available for adoption. (Gorey, Public Affairs Office, 2008 & Appendices D)

Several other adoption programs operate across the country. One such program involves prisoners in mustang gentling programs at numerous correctional facilities. While these gentling programs result in adoptions through auctions, they do not significantly impact the large number of horses that are available for adoption. (Kerson, 2008)

The BLM praises the Wild Mustang Makeover as a program that has done much to bring attention to the complicated issues the BLM faces. (Madigan, 2008) However, the makeover program cannot keep pace with the number of mustangs available for adoption. While the event is entertaining and educational, it will not support the numbers of horses that are currently in holding facilities awaiting adoption.

In 2007, the Mustang Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit organization, created the Extreme Mustang Makeover event to showcase the recognized value of mustangs through a national training competition. The focus and mission of the Mustang Heritage Foundation is to increase the adoption of wild horses living in the BLM holding facilities. The Mustang Makeover competition brings together 100 horse trainers from across the United States. Each trainer trains a wild mustang for 90 days and brings the horse to an event to compete with the other trainers to determine who has the best-trained horse. In 2007, seventy-five mustangs were adopted for a total of \$233,100 for a sale average of \$3,108. The BLM received \$125 per head as the minimum adoption fee, while the remainder was allocated for development and programs of the Mustang Heritage Foundation. As of 2008, the Mustang Heritage Foundation has been responsible for the adoption of nearly 1,000 mustangs through competitions and another of their programs called the Trainer Incentive Program. (Blasienz, 2008)

Since May 2005 Ford Motor Company has joined with the Department of the Interior to build public awareness for the plight of America's wild horses and to help fund their adoption. The program has raised over \$215,000 in donations, using funds to find

home for hundreds of eligible animals. (Ford Motor Company, 2008) While Ford's program is educational and worthwhile, the donations do not make up two percent of the BLM budget for the horses in captivity. This program's fund raising efforts are minimal. The result is that the mystique of the wild mustang gets promoted, but there is a lack of attention to the costs to the federal taxpayer.

It is clear, then, that even with collaboration from the private sector, the government bureau charged with controlling wild horse numbers is failing to meet the challenge with their primary emphasis on animal adoption as the answer. Solutions other than adoption must be explored and considered.

Concurrent with the problem of controlling wild horse numbers is a human problem. Ten million people die every year of hunger and hunger-related diseases. Over 854 million people all over the world know what it means to go to bed hungry every night. That is more than the combined populations of the United States, Canada, and the European Union. Approximately 24,000 people die from the effects of hunger each day, almost one person every 3.5 seconds. (Hunger Facts: International, 2008) One of the questions that should be raised is, can one of these problems become a partial solution to the other? If the meat of slaughtered horses could be used to feed the hungry, the number of wild horses could be reduced significantly while starving people could be rescued from hunger. The use of the meat for pet food would also help absorb numbers.

Coleman (2008) advocated a system in which a certain number would be slaughtered and the meat used for pet food or sent to a country where the use of the meat for human consumption is accepted. Coleman saw that a structured program that called for a certain number of horses to be slaughtered annually would curb the horse population and make what remained more manageable. He also stated that decisions were being made based on emotion rather than science. (Coleman, 2008) In 2004 the BLM was authorized to sell, without limitation, wild horses and burros that were either

over 10 years of age or had been passed over for adoption at least three times. The BLM has not followed this law because of the controversy surrounding selling horses for slaughter. (GAO Report, p.46,54)

One of the biggest challenges to reducing the numbers of horses by slaughtering is federal regulations and court rulings. (Ahern, et al., 2006 p.6) The estimated horse population in the US private sector is 9.2 million. USDA says 65,976 horses were harvested in the U.S. in 2004 and 91,757 in 2005. (Ahern, et al., 2006 p.3) These were unwanted animals in the private sector that were sold because they were no longer serviceable, were infirm or dangerous, or their owners could no longer care for them. Such horses moved through three U.S. plants, with the meat exported to Europe, Japan and Mexico. However, as of 2007, all three of the foreign-owned slaughterhouses in the United States were shut down. The horse slaughter industry continues to haul American horses to slaughter in Canada and Mexico, but that may end soon. Efforts are now underway in Congress to pass legislation to amend the Horse Protection Act to prohibit the shipping, transporting, moving, delivering, receiving, processing, purchasing, selling, or donation of horses and other equines to be humanely slaughtered for human consumption and for other purposes. (Ahern, et al., 2006)

Dr. Gary Potter (2006), Department of Animal Science, Texas A& M University, found that banning horse processing would do more harm than good to the horse welfare in this country. In a study commissioned by the Animal Welfare Council, researchers found that a horse-processing ban would devastate the horse market. (Ahern, et al., 2006) The researchers argued that the legislation did not provide fiscal support that would likely be needed to respond to an ever-increasing number of unwanted, abused, and neglected horses and that while those supporting a horse processing ban might have been well-intentioned, such a ban will make things much worse for tens of thousands of other horses, the whole horse industry, and society in

general. Those who supported the legislation offered no solution to care for the estimated 100,000 unwanted horses that must be dealt with annually in the U.S. Supporters of the legislation spread inaccurate information that is driving legislators to act on emotion and not on facts. This ban would cause more horses to stay on the market and thus be in competition with the mustang adoption program. The direct economic impact and future unintended economic impact of banning horse processing for human consumption is substantial. (Ahern, et al., 2006)

Thus is it that in 2008, the BLM was faced with ever-increasing numbers of animal in their care. The animal adoption programs in place did not solve the problem of excess animals because there were not enough adoptees to match the number of animals in waiting. Further, while the BLM had the legal authority under a 2004 law to slaughter some animals, public opinion and congressional reaction restrained them from using even their legal recourse. In addition, BLM required buyers to sign a statement that they do not intend to slaughter the animals. (GAO Report, 2008 p.9) The BLM also negotiated agreements with US Slaughter plants to notify the BLM if horses entered their facilities. (GAO Report, 2008, p.55) Still, if slaughter were to become part of the solution, the BLM would need to take a stand and have a plan ready to both implement and defend.

AVAILABLE SOLUTIONS

On June 30, 2008, federal official from the BLM made the highly controversial announcement that for the first time in agency's history, it was considering the euthanasia of the surplus of wild mustangs and burros that were housed at holding facilities across the country. (McAllister, 2008)

To underscore this euthanasia announcement, Director of the BLM Jim Caswell (2008) contended that while euthanasia might not be a popular solution, it might have to become one of the alternatives to continued maintenance and adoption. (Madigan,

2008) Wild Horse Annie, as a proponent of saving the wild mustangs said that if the herd sizes became unmanageable, she would consider euthanasia a viable option. (Time Magazine, 1959)

While euthanasia of horses is a difficult topic and many oppose the idea, it is an alternative that needs to be considered given the current number of horses in captivity. In 1978, the Wild Horse act was amended to authorize the BLM to euthanasia excess wild horse and burros for which an adoption demand by qualified individuals did not exist. (GAO Report, 2008 p.11) Management of safe and proper disposal of horse carcasses presents another problem in order to as people and other animals might need protection from disease outbreaks and the potential of environmental poisoning from euthanasia drugs. (Ahern, et al., 2006)

If captive horses were to be killed, Coleman (2008) suggested that it would make sense to get some use out of the horses. There is a certain amount of cost involved with slaughtering, and the horses could pay for the system themselves. There are countries in which people eat horsemeat, and there are dog food companies that want to buy the meat. (Coleman, 2008)

An alternative that the BLM has investigated is fertility control in wild horses, though no free-range western horse herd has yet to be managed with contraceptives. The BLM does not believe one single fertility control agent or device is available that meets all the stated needs of the agency (U.S. Geological Survey, Biological Resources Division & Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, October 2003 Revised March 2005, p.25)

The National Mustang Association was founded to ensure the survival of the wild mustang. While their goal is to help these symbols of the Old West continue to lead a natural, free-roaming existence, this is the only organization that offers to let an individual adopt a horse without taking possession of it. (National Mustang Association

Adopt-A-Horse-For-A-Year, 2002) This type of program, if well funded and marketed properly, has the potential to increase adoptions substantially. If Individuals were sent brochures, pictures, and information about a specific horse, a relationship could be built between the adopter and the horse.

Another idea that has been put forward is to have the federal government ask Americans to donate to the cause of preservation and include a box at the end of IRS forms, just as they do with fund for the presidential election, asking taxpayers to check a box to indicate a donation. (Dokoupil, 2008)

There are several ways to approach the problem of what to do with excess wild animals. Fertility control, adoption without possession, and taxpayer donations could be some of the answers, but the solution that remains the most likely to reduce the necessary number of animals remains slaughter. That final solution would bring with it a number of benefits.

BENEFITS DERIVED FROM SLAUGHTER

The first benefit of the slaughtering plan is financial. At the present time, the wild animal control program is costly and inefficient. This condition could be improved if a solution that would dramatically reduce the number of animals in the care of the BLM were to be adopted, and that solution is slaughter. Some data already exist to substantiate the money return. According to the USDA, the value of horsemeat sold for processing in the United States in 2002 was \$26 million. If the BLM were to adhere to the law and sell without limitation, the federal government could profit from the sale of the horsemeat.

While horsemeat is not consumed in the United States, it is nutritious. A four-ounce piece of horsemeat contains 20% more protein 25% less fat, nearly 20% less sodium, double the iron, and 1 mg less cholesterol than a four-ounce serving of beef sirloin. Data from 2005 shows that almost five million people worldwide eat horsemeat

processed in their countries. China leads the way with 204,000 metric tons. In the western hemisphere, Mexico and Brazil process 100,000 metric tons. (Ahern, et al., 2006)

The idea of feeding the hungry around the world, if properly presented, could help solve the BLM problem of caring for horses in captivity and for future horses taken off the range. The BLM could mount a positive campaign to feed the hungry around the world with the horsemeat. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2006), there are 820 million chronically hungry people in developing countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, there are 204 million; in Asia and the Pacific, 156 million; in India, 221 million; in China, 142 million. In the western hemisphere, in Latin America and the Caribbean area, there are 53 million. (Hunger Facts: International, 2008)

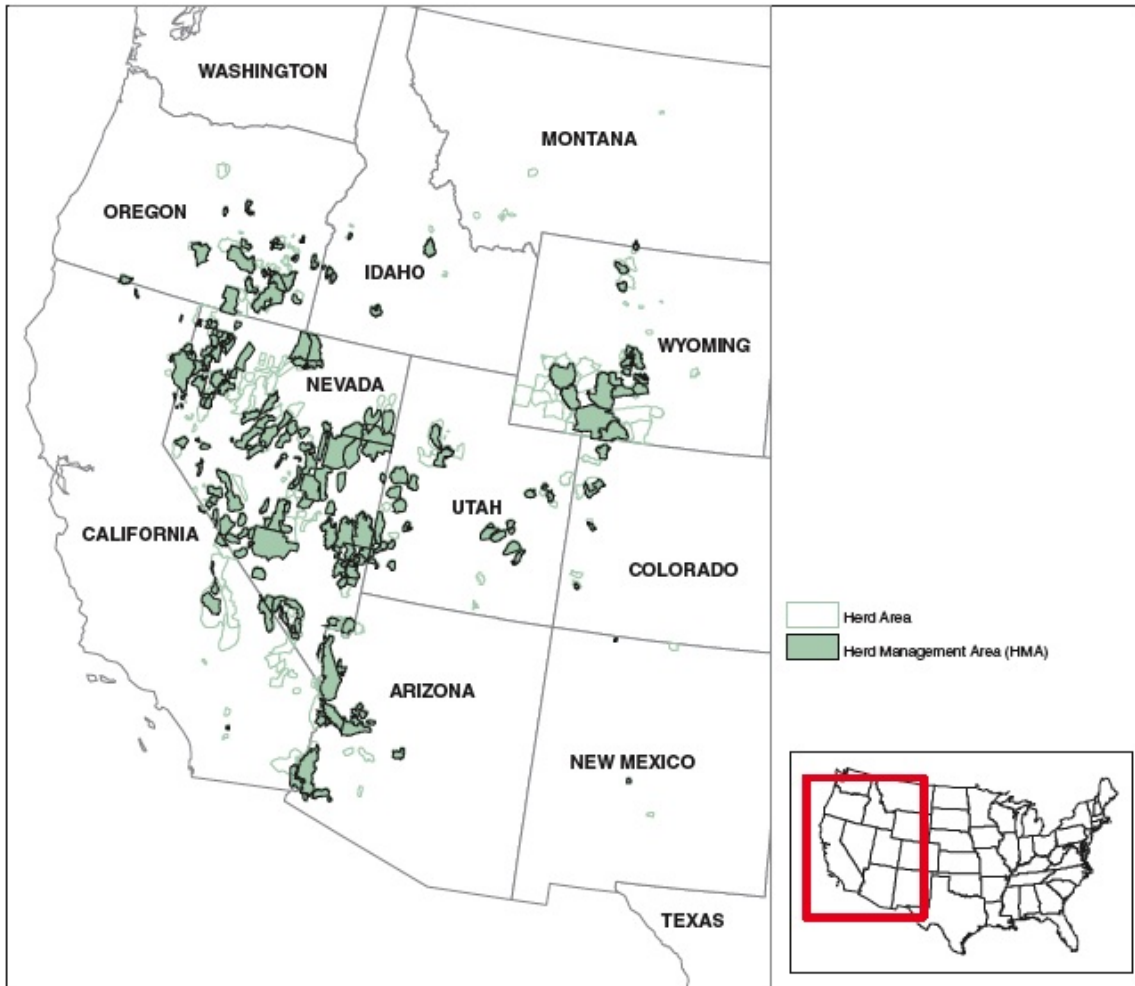
CONCLUSION

Though wild horses are a part of our American heritage, some action needs to be taken to reduce the numbers of wild horses in the open ranch and in captivity. One of the biggest problems with the numbers of horses that the BLM has to manage is the public's opinion about what should be done with the excess horses. Adoption and fertility control appear to be acceptable options, but these options do not come close to solving the cost-benefits problem. Individuals and groups have played on emotions without giving adequate thought to the inefficiencies of the current program. While the BLM itself states that costs are rising, the American public resists the most efficient way to solve the problem. Emotion, not science, is driving the decisions that allow the inefficiency to continue.

Until pressure is put on the US Government and the BLM to comply with the law and effectively manage this inefficient program, costs will continue to outpace revenue.

The Secretary of the Department of Interior must strengthen compliance and enforce consequences. Enacting legislation to prohibit transporting horses to Canada and Mexico would be detrimental to the equine industry and would inevitably put more strain on government entities for both horses in the private sector and horses under federal care. Americans need to accept and embrace the idea of using horsemeat for human consumption outside of the United States. While the decisions may be difficult, science and fiscal responsibility should dictate responses instead of emotions and special interests. An important solution is available and should be implemented. That solution would benefit the government financially and would benefit others around the world by providing a food source.

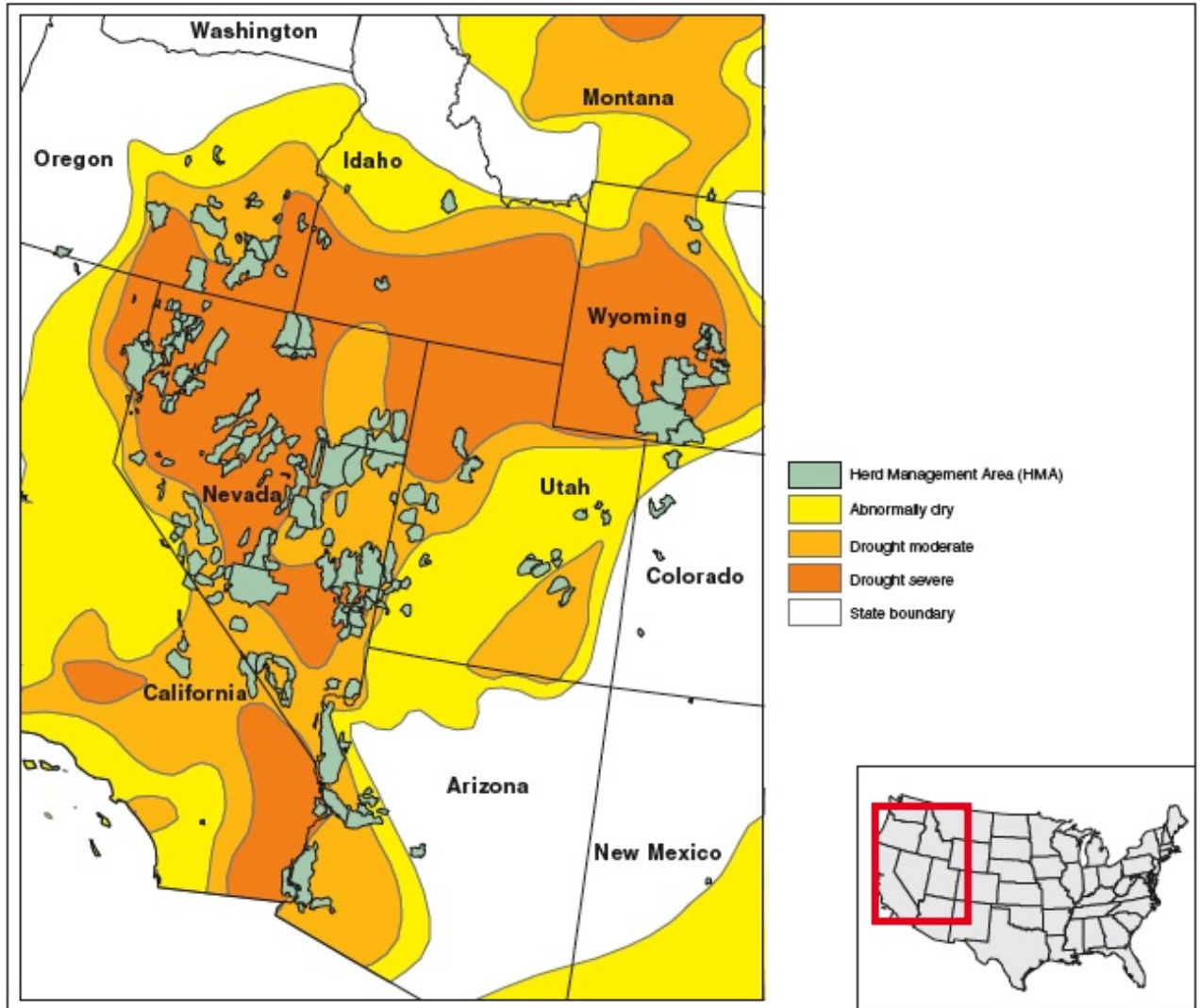
Figure 1: BLM Herd Areas and HMAs in the Western United States



Source: BLM.

The number of HMAs and their acreage has changed over time for many different reasons, including BLM land being redesignated as National Park land and declines in forage or water that make an area unsustainable,

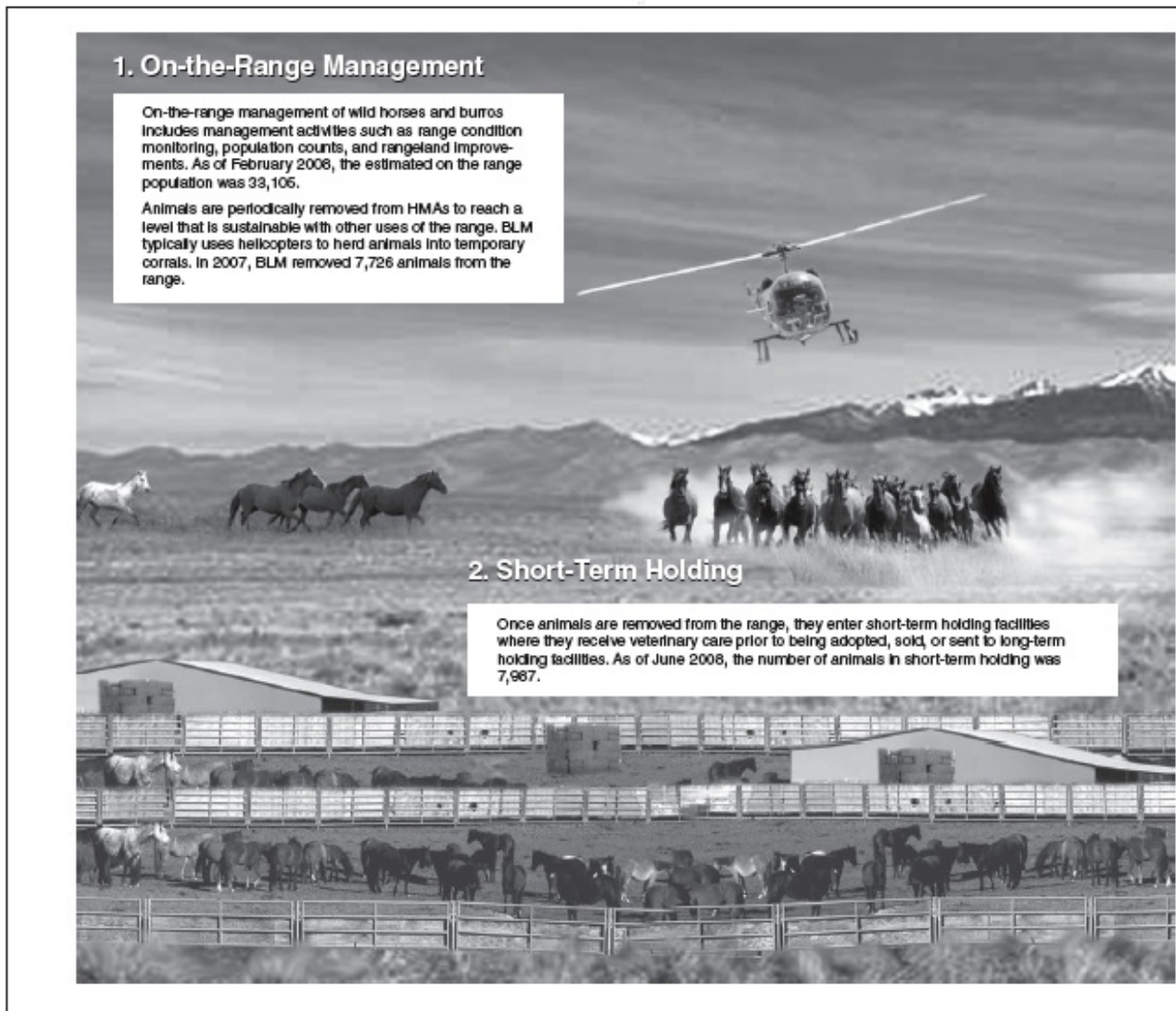
Figure 2: Drought Conditions and HMAs, February 2008



Source: BLM.

Determining which type of animal is responsible for rangeland damage is important to properly managing an HMA and in determining the number of animals to permit on the range. BLM can control the number of livestock

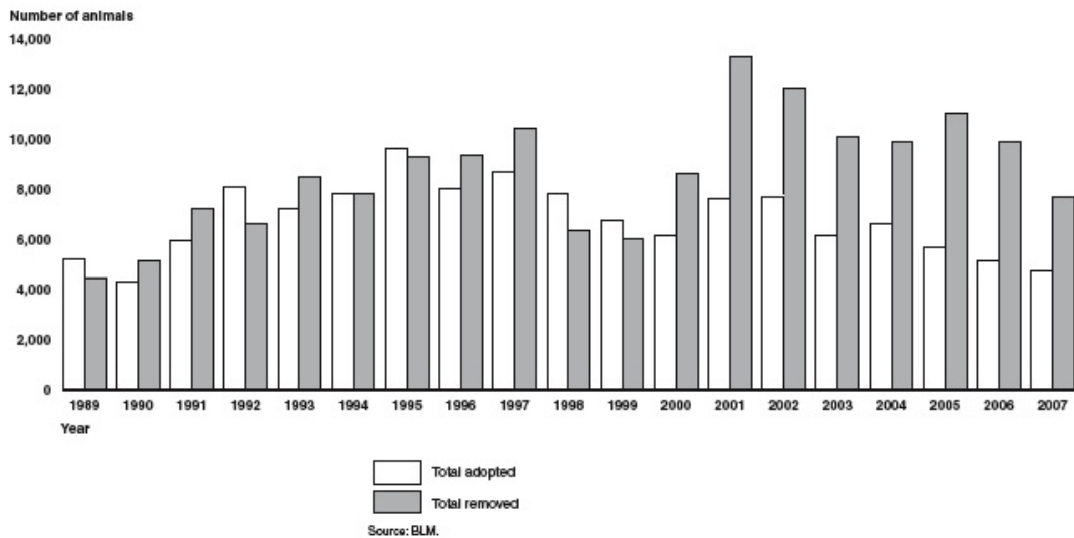
Figure 3: BLM Management of Wild Horses and Burros on and off of the Range



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Figure 7: Comparison of Removed and Adopted Wild Horses and Burros, 1989 through 2007



One alternative for managing unadoptable excess wild horses and burros, as provided for by the 2004 amendment to the 1971 act, is to sell the animals “without limitation.” The act directs BLM to offer excess animals for sale that are more than 10 years old or that have been offered unsuccessfully for adoption at least three times. At the time of the amendment, BLM estimated that approximately 8,400 animals were eligible for sale. To date, BLM has sold only about 2,700 animals—far fewer than originally expected, despite the low average selling price in 2006 of \$15 (see table 10).

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