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NEVADA'S

WILD HORSES AND BURROS

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Wild Horses and Burros in Nevada

Senator Reid Wants Accountability

Representatives from Nevada's Wild Horse Commission recently traveled to Washington, DC, meeting with our Congressional Delegation to discuss the current critical level of Nevada's Wild Horse program. We validated that there is a general awareness of certain aspects of the program. However, it became immediately apparent that additional emphasis is necessary to insure a full awareness of the significance and scope of all impacts to Nevadans. Although grass roots support for action is strong within Nevada it does not appear this is fully realized at the national level. Additionally, serious concerns over accountability by the BLM were encountered at the national level. In 1992, the Bureau presented a plan to Congress that would bring the wild horse program under control. Senator Reid was responsible for securing the necessary funding for that program as well as the Bureau's fertility control program. Neither program reached their highly promised goals and the funds have long been spent. Accountability for the funding has led to a loss of credibility in the BLM Wild Horse Program. Accountability issues are very real, in specific discussions with Senator Reid it was apparent that he is less than supportive of the BLM for the above noted reasons.

Foundation Feasibility Study

The State of Nevada Wild Horse Commission is concurrently working with the BLM to establish a National Wild Horse and Burro Foundation similar to the National Parks Foundation, US Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, to name a few. This Foundation would assist the BLM in marketing strategies, educational opportunities, mentoring programs, wild horse shows, registries, and training programs to enhance the Bureau's adoption program. The feasibility study for this Foundation will be final and presented June 30, 2000. We anticipate working diligently from there for the establishment of this Foundation by fall, 2000.

Current Situation Requires Management

There is a significant population of wild horses and burros in Nevada. Although an appropriate management level (AML) is yet to be determined, BLM loosely estimates it will be approximately 14,000 head. Numbers may be argued up or down from there, however, for this comparison I will use 14,000 just as a point of reference. The current population is estimated at slightly below 24,000 head. Without gather and removal, the population increases by 18-20% per year (4550 +/- head). To reach the 14,000 population level, BLM must annually remove a significant percentage of the 10,000 excess animals plus the 4550 increase each year. For the current fiscal year BLM only has funding to gather 2700 head (not even equal to the annual increase).

The actual AML is a product of several factors. The process culminates in allocating forage to domestic livestock and wild horses and burros while concurrently providing habitat for native fish and wildlife, and watershed protection. This has been done on 60 of the 103 herd management areas in Nevada and will be completed on an additional 16 areas this year. In the 60 areas where the process has been completed the excess population is approximately 70% over the established AML.

Clearly, current operations not only fail to achieve the goal of reaching AML, but are resulting in movement of the population number in the opposite direction. The program is characterized by crisis, emergency, litigation and court mandate. BLM is well aware of this, but is at the mercy of a hopelessly under funded program. Livestock industry representatives, many wild horse advocates, wildlife advocates, sportsmen, watershed planners, environmentalists and others are also aware of and significantly alarmed by this situation.

Regardless of the species involved, overgrazing leads to significant consequences to Nevada's vital interests. Overgrazing reduces desirable vegetation needed to protect soils from erosion. Fragile Great Basin plant communities evolve into less productive sites. Animals face an inward spiral of suffering, dehydration, starvation, and eventually succumb to an agonizing death. Noxious weeds invade and susceptibility to wild fire increases. Riparian areas are lost or become unsuitable for native fish and wildlife species. The list of

sensitive and endangered species grows and management controls become untenable for economic operations. Uncontrolled water run off is increased, water quality is reduced and natural processes enter a downward spiral that changes the landscape to less productive sites. Economic uses directly and indirectly dependent on native range and habitat are negatively impacted and eventually lost. Most seriously impacted including the health of the herds, are the livestock industry, the hunting and fishing infrastructure, outfitters and guides, and other businesses linked to the outdoor segment of tourism. Collectively these represent a significant component of the economic profile of nearly all rural Nevada counties.

Proper Management of Wild Horses is Critical to the Economics of Rural Nevada

By contrast, properly managed wild horse herds are a tremendous asset. As a feature of tourism, they capture the imagination and provide the same intrigue as ghost towns, historic mining districts and the pioneer spirit of the old west. In a natural setting wild horses enhance diversity and provide opportunities as a recreation destination into rural areas that depend economically on tourism.

BLM has proposed a 4 year strategy to reach AML and maintain wild horse herds in balance with other uses. The strategy calls for determining the proper numerical and seasonal balance between domestic livestock and wild horses. Details of the strategy respect private property rights, honor State water law, incorporate water quality concerns, and wildlife habitat and endangered species needs. The process considers long term economic development and includes opportunity for public involvement during decision making. The fundamental goal is to sustain the productivity of Nevada's rangelands and the economic viability of dependent communities and industries.

The plan includes use of veterinary science to reduce the 18-20% recruitment rate in order to slow the increase of populations in environmentally sensitive areas. The plan also calls for removal of wild horses documented as excess. Further, the plan calls for determining the correct numerical balance of grazing animals in the areas currently undocumented. This is followed by appropriate action to bring animal populations into compliance with decisions. Although fine details may be debated, the general concept of the plan has universal support of the effected public.

The plan would lead to a statewide population of wild horses and burros managed in many areas throughout the state. An estimated 5000-6000 wild horses from Nevada would be available for adoption nationally for the next five years. After this the annual adoption availability would be reduced to approximately 2600 animals, placing them in high demand. Initial costs to implement the plan appear high (\$29.4 million nationally/\$14 million for Nevada), but in contrast to the long term costs for future restoration and corrective action this amount is modest. The current national budget for wild horses and burros is \$20 million, thus the proposed program only represents a \$9 million increase at the national level. The long term outcome would be significantly reduced costs of maintaining the program. National figures are presented here to include the necessary expenses for adoption of wild horses outside of Nevada, as well as similar actions in other western States with wild horse populations.

Summary/Remedy

It is critical to Nevada that BLM's proposal be funded. Healthy rangelands resulting from the plan enhance accomplishment of our objectives for economic diversity, viability, and stability in rural counties. The benefits of the proposed plan and the consequences of inaction need the emphasis of your office at the national level. There needs to be a full awareness that the scope is much deeper than the surface issue of wild horses versus domestic livestock. The scope includes opportunities to increase tourism, hunting and fishing, wildlife viewing, improved water quality and yield, reduce noxious weed invasion, reduction of fire hazard and suppression costs, avoid inhumane death loss of wild horses and burros, recreational opportunities and to enhance the image of Nevada as a quality place to live with diverse, family oriented opportunities for leisure activities. BLM's current wild horse program is grossly ineffective and threatens all of these areas of vital interest for Nevada.

RESULTS OF OVERGRAZING*

***All of these horses were still alive at the time of the photos. When it reaches this point not only are the animals suffering terribly and dying, but wildlife die, irreparable damage to critical habitats occurs and it adversely impacts the economic stability of rural counties. These horses were from Austin and Tonopah, Nevada.**







