

HORSES: Critics Blame U.S. Government for Deaths of Animals in Nevada

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mares and stallions whose removal from a given herd would gradually suppress population growth.

Aiding Templeton in his mission is one of the wild-horse program's harshest critics—Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nevada), who calls BLM's past management attempts "an outright failure and total disaster."

In June, Reid learned of the plight of the Nellis horses and convened an exploratory hearing before a Senate subcommittee. Later, he unveiled a six-point "sound management plan" for Nevada's wild equines.

Among the problems, the senator said, is that Nevada's efforts have been "terribly underfunded." Although the state is home to more than two-thirds of the nation's wild horses and burros, it received just 18% of the \$13.7 million BLM allocated this year to manage the herds.

Reid's goal is to increase Nevada's share by 84%, to over \$4.6 million, and also provide money for fertility control and medical research. His plan is contained in an Interior Department appropriations bill now awaiting action by a House-Senate conference committee.

"I've been sitting here in Washington for nine years, hoping this problem would be taken care of," Reid said in an interview. "It seems the Bureau of Land Management has just been waiting for the wild horses to go away."

Wild horses were documented in Nevada as early as the 1820s, when explorers wrote of spotting the mustangs galloping across the territory's wide deserts and rocky canyons. As pioneers and miners arrived, their domestic horses bred with the steeds of Spanish descent and the herds mushroomed, reaching an estimated 2 million by the turn of the century. Burros, brought to the West by Jesuit missionaries, also multiplied as prospectors came to value their sturdy backs and sure-footedness.

Throughout the early 1900s, many of the stout, swift horses were conscripted for service in the U.S. Cavalry. After the Army became mechanized, demand for the ponies was supplanted by a new source—the can- et-food indus-

try. Entrepreneurs corralled and sold off thousands of horses, which were then considered feral animals free for the taking.

"The stories of those roundups are pretty terrible," said John Winnepenninx, the BLM's wild-horse specialist in Battle Mountain, Nev. "They used to fly beside the running herds and if they wouldn't turn, they'd shoot the lead horse to force the rest of 'em into traps."

Ranchers, most of whom continue to view wild horses as pesky interlopers that compete with sheep and cattle for food, also habitually shot the mustangs.

Sickened by such accounts, a Reno secretary named Velma Johnston launched a crusade to protect the dwindling herds in the 1960s. Known as Wild Horse Annie, Johnston mobilized thousands of schoolchildren and other horse sympathizers to pressure members of Congress to step in.

In 1971, they did, passing the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. The law declared the animals "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West" and shielded them from commercial exploitation and abuse.

By then, the herds had taken quite a tumble, their numbers dipping as low as 17,000. The BLM, which had been principally a grazing and mining regulator, was handed the reins and appointed caretaker.

Safe from slaughter, the horses soon began to multiply. At the same time, BLM began sorting out how best to balance its dual responsibilities of preserving wild horses and protecting the land they roam from overgrazing.

Critics charge that the bureau has fallen short of both goals. They say the BLM has spent millions to capture large numbers of wild horses—an estimated 100,000 between 1973 and 1990—without the scientific justification to do so.

The BLM, they say, has defined "appropriate herd levels" and rounded up "excess" horses under pressure from cattle and sheep ranchers, who complain the wild steeds are nibbling away at their economic return.

Moreover, studies have shown that the horse roundups have done little to improve the ecological conditions on the deteriorating rangelands of the West. BLM's

detractors say.

"Their management program makes no sense at all," said John Grandy, a vice president of the Humane Society of the United States. "We don't believe wild horses and wildlife are getting a fair share of the public land resources in this country."

Such criticisms were echoed in the August, 1990, report issued by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress. GAO officials cited occasions when the BLM's Nevada office determined that information on the availability of forage was insufficient to warrant a roundup, but then proceeded anyway.

In addition, the GAO found instances where the BLM ordered wild-horse captures in a region of Nevada one year and then allowed an increase in livestock grazing in the same area the next year.

The BLM's approach is "not consistent with balanced stewardship of range resources and reinforces the image of undue deference to livestock interests," the GAO said.

Grandy put it more bluntly: "The cows," he said, "always win."

Some BLM officials acknowledge that such complaints had merit. But they say a new mind-set reigns in the bureau today.

"The BLM used to be the grazing service with a little bit of mining thrown in, but we're much more of a multiple-use organization now," said Winnepenninx, the Battle Mountain horse specialist. "We do order cattle reductions when the data supports it."

The perennial roundups have caused another problem for the BLM—what to do with the animals.

In the early 1970s, the bureau established an adopt-a-horse program, which has placed thousands of wild steeds in the homes of people willing to pay \$125.

But demand has not always kept pace with supply. In 1984, when massive captures led to a buildup of horses in government feedlots, BLM instituted a "fee-waiver program." This allowed individuals to take—free of charge—large numbers of horses considered unadoptable because of their age or physical imperfections.

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The bureau disposed of about 20,000 horses in this fashion over a four-year period, but the program led to serious abuse. The GAO, which called it a "prescription for commercial exploitation of wild horses," said hundreds died from dehydration and starvation after being given to unfit adopters. Thousands more were sent to the slaughterhouse.

Showered with criticism, the BLM abolished the fee-waiver program in 1988. But critics say problems remain with another disposal option—private "sanctuaries."

Two sanctuaries—in South Dakota and Oklahoma—provide about 4,000 horses a fine life in first-rate accommodations. But they are expensive, costing the government nearly \$1 million apiece each year.

When they signed contracts with the government, operators pledged to make the sanctuaries self-sufficient, but that has not occurred and the BLM wants to end the relationship. If that happens, bureau officials concede the 4,000 sanctuary horses will have to be returned to the Western range.

The newest battleground is the Nellis Air Force Range, a desolate swath of desert south of the town of Tonopah.

In August, 1990, a government census showed that 6,200 horses were subsisting on land the BLM figured could comfortably sustain about 1,000. When another count was made five months later, that number had plunged to 4,300.

Cathy Barcomb, executive director of Nevada's Commission for the Preservation of the Wild Horse, believes as many as 2,000 horses died on Nellis because of the BLM's negligence.

Tom Pogatchnik, the newly appointed chief horse specialist for the BLM in Nevada, said the Nellis herd area has always been a tricky management problem because of its size—300,000 acres—and because access is tightly guarded by the military.

Pogatchnik said the bureau's range managers suspected that five years of drought had dried up water holes and reduced grasses and shrubs, but lacked data to support their assumptions. Thus, they felt attempting a roundup of Nellis horses would inevitably trigger a lawsuit from the vigilant animal protectionists.

Ultimately, the bureau went ahead with a roundup, removing 1,862 horses over the summer.

Among the animals rescued were 400 sickly foals that wound up in Reno. Lappin and volunteers from her group, Wild Horse Organized Assistance, have spent \$9,000 and

four months nursing them back to health.

"At the peak, I had 60 babies in my back yard, in pens on every spot of bare land we've got," said Lappin, who fought beside Wild Horse Annie for passage of the 1971 wild horse law. "They were starving, some had pneumonia, they were covered with abscesses and coyote bites, and their hoofs were worn down and bleeding from trying to keep up with their mothers. We lost 11."

The rest of the captured horses landed in Palomino Valley, north of Reno, where Fred Wyatt runs the way station for animals headed for the BLM's adopt-a-horse program. Wyatt, whose love of horses began during his boyhood in Spur, Tex., is a 30-year BLM veteran. He believes the bureau's early administrators viewed the wild herds "as a problem, something to be disposed of."

Pointing to a corral where his new boss, BLM chief Templeton, was slipping a saddle on the back of his once-wild colt, Wyatt talked of new leadership, a new philosophy.

"Wild-horse management, from top to bottom, has had problems," said the silver-haired wrangler. "We've spent lots of taxpayers' money and we still haven't got it licked. But we've worked awfully hard, and now I think we're getting there."