

No Country for Wild Horses

by Penny Randell

There is a tremendous controversy at hand regarding wild horses here in the West. Rangeland ecologists report that nearly 90,000 horses and burros roam freely in Western states, although the lands are only able to support 27,000. These animals multiply rapidly with an outcome of populations doubling every four to five years. These figures do not include the number of annual foals, which stands at 14,000 to 18,000 head at this time. The oldest newspaper in Utah, the Deseret News, spent eight months covering this issue. After interviewing wildlife experts, rangeland ecologists, ranchers, cowboys and others, the figures stand true.

This is a situation that tugs at the heartstrings of the American West with the public lands these animals use to graze upon. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), says it will cost \$5 billion and take 15 years to get the herds to their rightful populations. Recognizing the number of years involved here, it is believed significant damage has already fallen to various landscapes that will take decades to regrow, or never recover at all.

Because many of these populations are managed with artificial boundaries on lands where predators have been removed for the livestock, the cost is overwhelming. At present, there are 50,000 horses kept in off-range corrals or pastures that could be adopted. However, age and other physical factors keep this from happening. Corraling of wild horses by the BLM costs the American taxpayer \$81 million a year just to manage. This number is predicted to increase to \$1 billion relatively soon as horses and burros are ushered off the range. The final figure stands at \$47,000 per animal over the period of their lifetime.

The BLM operates under strict scrutiny and deals with a litany of lawsuits surrounding roundups, or lack thereof. Supposedly it is illegal to euthanize healthy horses or offer them for unrestricted sale because they may end up in a Canadian or Mexican slaughterhouse. On the other hand, the U.S. does purchase horse meat from these countries to feed our exotic animals in zoos. Critics called foul on what they said was an overblown and exaggerated problem and said “gathering” for “limited sale” was merely a disguised effort to slaughter horses involved.

It should be remembered that the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burro Act was passed unanimously through Congress and signed by former President Nixon on December 15, 1971. This act protects wild horses and burros within designated territories by both the Forest Service and BLM. Despite this, the BLM uses low-flying helicopters to stampede and round up these horses, removing them by the thousands from public lands in the West each year. Once gathered, the animals are placed in holding facilities. Such efforts are intended to protect wild horses and burros from capture, branding, harassment and death. After all, as declared symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West, and with their contributing to the diversity of life forms within the Nation, these animals must be protected.

Wild horse welfare organizations believe the federal government sets its goals too low. Along with the 90,000 free roamers, there are 2 million privately owned cows sharing the land that take a significant toll. These groups feel the deck is stacked in favor of ranchers. The debate on what

to do is currently at a stalemate. However, last year the House of Representatives sought an appropriation for \$11 million for reversible birth control for wild horses and burros on federal land. Congress disagreed and instead penciled in a \$21 million increase in wild horse program, but only after BLM completes a five-year plan to increase roundups and birth control. The Biden administration hasn't yet joined the fight, but advocates think they have an ally in the appointment of the new interior secretary, former Rep. Deb Haaland from New Mexico. After celebrating her selection, 70 wild horse conservation organizations consigned a letter to the new secretary calling for an outright ban on livestock grazing on federal land for the sake of the wild horses and burros. They stand strong in their demands for a scientific assessment of what grazing permits for cows and sheep mean to sustainable populations for wild horses.

In a 2019 survey the Congressional Budget Office reported that the BLM spent \$79 million on rangeland management, but collected just \$26 million in grazing fees. Last year alone ranchers paid \$1.35 per month per animal (the least amount allowed by law) to graze on BLM lands. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association says the problem is inescapable and there are just too many horses. It has been said, "The sclerotic (rigid and unresponsive) nature of public lands management prevents any progress from being made. In the meantime, rangelands, ecosystems and wildlife species they support all suffer because for some groups and enthusiasts no price is too high to keep wild horses from being managed in a responsible manner."

But, what does a responsible manner mean? Wild horses in government holding facilities in America are set to be killed to make room for cattle farms. After a significant vote from the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board of the BLM, up to 45,000 wild horses are to be culled using taxpayers' money as part of an "emergency measure." It has been said that domestic horse slaughter is a necessary part of the billion-dollar horse industry. This industry provides revenue, jobs and taxes. Supposedly, it also offers a humane, economically viable disposal option for unwanted and dangerous horses. In preparation the wild horses have already been relocated to make room for the cattle ranchers who claim that resources are too limited to support the wild horses.

For decades now, extra cash is earned by the cowboys who round up the wild horses for nothing more than slaughter. These cowboys have always been called mustangers who believed the wild horses were a nuisance that added no value to the land. To kill a horse, the area just under the forelock is penetrated with a bolt gun or gunshot that leaves the animal unconscious. The next step is to allow the animal to bleed out to ensure death. Their meat is used to feed other animals or for human consumption. Recently, Taco Bell has officially joined the Club Horse Meat organization. It has been reported that Taco Bell's products contained more than 1% horse meat.

The American public has made clear their belief that the BLM should never be allowed to slaughter or even round up wild horse herds. Still, the BLM was originated by wealthy cattle ranchers and various power brokers for their own gain. These roundups are taking place without the input of the public, despite the fact that the lands belong to the American people. In return, the public is legally entitled to add major input to all these happenings and receive timely responses. Considering Wyoming and Colorado, powerful grazing associations control these lands and have eliminated all impediments to their seizing it. Cattle drives who used slaves and cattle barons that controlled all endeavors concerning wild horses engendered a wealthy, fast-

growing cattle industry. In control of all these grazing lands, the cattle barons perched above the cattle herds, selling and slaughtering cows as they saw fit.

Cattle barons consider the wild horses to be nothing more than an impediment. Somehow these critters adapted to the wilderness, never mind efforts to stop such. No longer recognized as a symbol of the great American West and left alone to survive on their own, the wild horse has become nothing more than a target of land acquisition. Sadly, the roundups mean being transported to places where there is little chance of survival, meeting death in the end. The myth of being adopted is actually a coverup of the fact that the BLM doesn't even keep track of their whereabouts.

The BLM is obviously infiltrated with ranchers and anti-science types that only appear to be operating under regulations. They carry out mass roundups of wild horses and burros, forgetting to mention that their livestock share this very land. American taxpayers pay ranchers to operate the helicopters that do the job at hand. Some horses are shipped to the Midwest where contractors pay more than \$3 per day per horse, or close to \$100 per month. Meanwhile, ranchers in the West are paying less than a nickel a day for a cow and calf or for five sheep to graze on public lands.

All these practices have been federally approved because of the money they generate for both cattlemen and the government. In the end, the cattle industry for sure wanted the government to control and regulate the use of public lands. This is how the BLM came to be. It was never created to allow the public to control their own lands.

Horses have always been an integral part of the American lifestyle. They were essential in the growth of America to traverse long distances, for farming, mail delivery and even as instruments of war. The horse was always a key contributor during the western expansion and is as important as every animal who lives on our public lands. To say that the horses are putting a "strain" on the overall ecosystem is a pernicious argument. It's the human who puts most of the strain on this world. In the meantime, the BLM MUST protect these horses if they consider themselves managers of public lands.

Today the BLM is at a crossroads which will inevitably determine the future of America's wild horses. Know for certain science is the only path and, in this case, it is welcomed and demanded. Will the BLM truly protect our public lands for all species or simply remain a tool of the rich and powerful? Meanwhile, take a minute and ponder the horse. Find one; pet one; look him in the eye. There's nothing like it and this is what it's really all about.