

FREE ROAMING EQUIDS AND ECOSYSTEM SUSTAINABILITY

National Fact Sheet

May 29, 2019

The **Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act** was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1971 to protect wild horses and burros on federal land by placing them under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Broadly, the law declares wild horses and burros to be “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West” and stipulates that the BLM and USFS have the responsibility and authority to manage and protect herds in their respective jurisdictions within herd management areas (HMAs) where wild horses and burros were found roaming in 1971.

Among other things, the Act:

- Makes it a federal crime for anyone to harass or kill “wild” horses or burros on federal land.
- Sets the groundwork for further studies of the animals’ behavior and habitats.
- Permits public lands to be set aside for use as herd management areas.
- Requires that herd management plans “maintain a thriving natural ecological balance among wild horse populations, wildlife, livestock, and vegetation and to protect the range from the deterioration associated with overpopulation.”
- Allows for public lands to be utilized for multiple purposes while improving the health and stability of “wild” horse and burro populations.

However, over the past several decades, management of these wild horses and burros has been less than effective. Today, the very wild horses and burros the Act was designed to protect, native wildlife, the rangeland ecosystem, taxpayers, and western way of life are impacted by overpopulations of horses and burros throughout 10 western states.

The purpose of 2019 Free-roaming Equid Summit is to develop a stakeholder-based comprehensive communication strategy and processes for managing free-roaming equids in concert with other public lands multiples-use to achieve western rangeland ecosystem sustainability.

Appropriate Management Level (AML)

An appropriate management level (AML) is the number of animals BLM calculates that can sustainably thrive in balance with other public rangeland species, resources, and uses in a given area.

As of 1 March 2019, the BLM estimated that there were 88,090 free-roaming equids (wild horses and burros) on BLM-administered HMAs. This is more than three times the ecological balance. To achieve herd sizes to sustain ecological balance the BLM would now need to remove more than 65,000 animals from designated HMAs.

Current Crisis

- Wild horse and burro populations increase by 15-20 percent per year. As a result, populations can double every 4 to 5 years.
- Horses on the range are competing with wildlife for water, forage, and cover. Because of this increased competition, horses and wildlife are starving and dying. The impacts are exacerbated during droughts.
- BLM currently uses gathers and fertility control to manage populations. However, these current actions are not reducing the growth rates of horse and burro populations, and our western rangelands continue to deteriorate.
- On-range horse populations are growing by more than 14,000-18,000 animals a year. While horses and burros in holding facilities can be adopted, the number of adoptions has decreased over the years to fewer than 3,000 annually. As a comparison, there were 6,000 adoptions annually in the early 2000s and 12,000 in the late 1980s.

Impact on Rangelands

- Unmanaged herds impact public lands and watersheds. Excess wild horses and burros over-graze native grasses and trample and pack soils, which opens the door to cheatgrass, other invaders and wildfire.
- Cheatgrass, an invasive grass that by June turns to stiff brown stems with sticky seedheads, is unhealthy for horses, burros and all livestock and is a wildfire hazard.
- Rangelands deteriorate quickly under excessive numbers of horses. Excess horses are being kept on the range because of the high cost of holding them in short and long-term holding facilities.
- Unmanaged herds trample springs and riverbed areas, negatively affecting water quality and access for wildlife.

Impact on Taxpayers

- American taxpayers now pay over \$50 million annually to care for and feed the 46,000 horses and burros in holding facilities; nearly two-thirds of the bureau's \$80 million program budget.
- According to the BLM, about \$48,000 is spent on each unadoptable horse that remains in a corral and holding facilities over its lifetime.
- With nearly 50,000 horses held off-range that's billions of federal dollars that could be going toward education, healthcare or other taxpayer needs.

The Path Forward

- Through the 1971 Act, the BLM and USFS have the authority to protect and manage wild horses and burros on public lands. They have historically managed free-roaming populations by removing animals from the range when necessary.
- Appropriately reducing herd sizes will allow BLM and USFS to restore the health and productivity of public rangelands, improve the health of the horses and wildlife, and ensure multiple uses of public lands as mandated by law.
- It is important to identify commonalities that all free-roaming equid and public land management stakeholders can agree upon.