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**House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands**  
***“Challenges and Potential Solution to the BLM’s Wild Horse & Burro Program”***  
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**Introduction**

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Tsongas, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the management of wild horses and burros on our nation’s public lands. The Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM’s) Wild Horse and Burro program is part of the agency’s broad multiple-use and sustained yield mandate which requires that the BLM manage the public lands for a variety of uses to meet the needs of the American people. The overall goal of the Wild Horse and Burro program is to ensure that healthy wild horses and burros thrive on healthy public rangelands.

The BLM shares the concerns of members of Congress and the public about growing herd populations; herd and rangeland health; program costs; and the effectiveness of past management strategies. To address these concerns, the BLM is taking a number of steps, including sponsoring a significant research program focused on fertility control; transitioning horses from corrals to more cost-effective pastures; working to increase adoptions with new programs and partnerships; and requesting legislative authority to allow for the immediate transfer of horses to other agencies that have a need for work animals. Despite these many initiatives, additional tools and resources are needed to bring this program onto a sustainable path. We sincerely appreciate the Subcommittee’s interest and look forward to further dialogue on these issues.

**Congressional Mandates**

The BLM manages wild horse and burro herds in 177 Herd Management Areas (HMAs) on 27 million acres of public lands located in 10 Western states. The BLM’s primary authority for managing these herds is the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (WH&B Act), which directs the BLM to manage the herds as populations of healthy animals, in balance with other uses of the public lands, while maintaining the health and productive capacity of the range. This dual legislative mandate – protecting wild horse populations while at the same time protecting the rangelands from deterioration – presents the BLM with a considerable challenge.

As the first step toward achieving healthy herds, the WH&B Act requires the BLM to determine the “Appropriate Management Level” (AML) – that is, the number of wild horses and burros that can graze on the land in balance with other resources and uses. The BLM takes into account all natural resources (including forage, water, and wildlife) and authorized uses of the public lands, consistent with the Act and with the BLM’s multiple-use and sustained-yield mandate set out in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. The BLM has determined that the total AML for wild horses and burros on the range west-wide is slightly more than 26,700 animals.

Herd populations that exceed AML threaten the health of native plants, wildlife, and other public land resources and uses – and place the horses and burros themselves at risk of disease and

starvation. To prevent range deterioration from herd overpopulation, the WH&B Act directs the BLM to reduce the number of animals on the range to a sustainable level.

Options for keeping excess animals on rangelands are limited. The 1971 WH&B Act prevents the BLM from relocating herds to areas where they did not exist in 1971. Since wild horses have virtually no natural predators and herds double in size every four years, the BLM's primary tool to ensure that herd sizes are consistent with the land's capacity to support them has been to gather excess wild horses and burros and remove them from the range.

### **Population Numbers – On-Range, Off-Range & Adoptions**

To provide proper context for the scale of the Wild Horse and Burro program, it is helpful to note the total number of horses and burros that are currently on the public lands as well as the number of animals that have been moved to off-range pastures and corrals, which are usually leased from private parties. The BLM estimates that as of March 1, 2016, more than 67,000 wild horses and burros (about 55,300 horses and 11,700 burros) are roaming on BLM-managed rangelands – exceeding by more than 40,000 the maximum number of animals (i.e., the AML) that the BLM has determined can thrive in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses. It is estimated that 10,000 foal births will occur in the current foaling season (March – June 2016).

In addition to the animals that are currently on the public lands, the agency is paying to support over 45,000 horses that, over the past two decades, were removed from the range to help sustain the health of the public lands. After gathers, wild horses and burros removed from the range enter short-term holding facilities where they receive veterinary care prior to being moved to corrals and pastures. The BLM uses 26 corrals (BLM-owned, contract, and state correctional facilities) to hold and prepare wild horses and burros for adoption and sale; and 25 contracts for pastures for long-term holding. As of May 2016, approximately 14,700 animals are being cared for in corrals and approximately 31,000 animals are being cared for in pastures.

The placement of gathered animals with qualified adopters has been an essential component of the BLM's overall herd population management strategy since the beginning. Since 1971, more than 235,000 wild horses and burros have been placed through the BLM's Adopt-a-Wild-Horse-or-Burro program. Until the last several years, the number of animals removed from the range was about equal to the number of animals adopted. In the early 2000s, for example, the BLM placed nearly 8,000 horses with private adopters each year. Over the past 10 years, however, the number of excess animals gathered has outpaced adoptions. Despite aggressive marketing, adoption demand has fallen dramatically and is now down to roughly 2,500 animals each year, while the BLM has gathered an average of about 6,700 animals per year over the past decade.

Animals that are not adopted or sold are generally returned to corrals or placed in pastures. Currently, the BLM has 25 contracts for pastures in Oklahoma, Kansas, Iowa, South Dakota, Montana, and Nebraska. Each pasture is 8,000 to 15,000 acres in size. In addition, the BLM has

contracts for three eco-sanctuaries, located in Oklahoma and Wyoming, which provide public education about wild horses and offer ecotourism opportunities.

### **Program Costs**

With more than 112,000 horses and burros in the BLM's care – both on-range and off-range – the agency is redoubling its efforts to control program costs. The total lifetime cost of caring for an animal that is removed from the range is substantial. Costs for lifetime care in a corral approach \$50,000 per horse. With over 45,000 horses and burros already in off-range corrals and pastures, this means that without new opportunities for placing these animals with responsible owners, the BLM will spend more than \$1 billion to care for and feed these animals, which have already been removed from the range, over the remainder of their lives.

The BLM currently spends two-thirds of its Wild Horse and Burro program budget (\$49 million, or 65 percent of \$77 million in FY 2015) to care for animals removed from the range. Resources are inadequate to care for additional animals in holding facilities.

Given this vast financial commitment, the BLM is now severely limited in how many animals it can afford to remove from the range. The BLM has recently reduced the number of animals it is removing from the range to approximately 3,500 animals each year – about the same number of animals that leave the off-range system annually through adoption, sale and natural mortality. The BLM is prioritizing removals in response to public health and safety concerns (i.e., animals on highways, in agricultural fields, etc.); private land encroachment; Greater sage-grouse Focal Areas; research; court orders; and emergencies.

### **BLM Actions Underway**

Over the past seven years, the BLM has doubled the amount of funding used for managing our nation's wild horses and burros, but current strategies cannot keep pace with constant population growth. Since the BLM first began tracking wild horse and burro population numbers in the 1970s, herd populations have consistently exceeded appropriate management levels. Herd populations in the 1970s and 1980s surpassed 64,000 animals, more than twice what the rangelands could sustain. Through an aggressive gather strategy and high adoption rates in the 1990s and early 2000s, the BLM was able to reduce the herd populations to near AML levels. Unfortunately, as the adoption rates fell, more horses were put into corrals and pastures limiting the number of additional animals that could be gathered. Today, the on-range population stands at 67,000 and growing; longer term solutions must be found if we are to ensure the health of wild horses and burros and the public rangelands.

The BLM is taking steps toward longer-term solutions – moving forward with a population growth-suppression strategy; working to increase adoptions of horses and burros through training and incentives; and requesting legislative authority to allow the immediate transfer of horses to Federal, state, and local agencies with a need for work animals.

### **Investment in Fertility Control Research**

The BLM is pursuing an aggressive population growth-suppression strategy. Research is the first step. In 2013, the National Academy of Sciences confirmed that there are no highly effective, easily delivered, and affordable fertility-control methods for wild horses and burros. The BLM is committed to applying the best available fertility-control methods and vaccines to the maximum extent feasible and appropriate, and is open to new public-private partnerships that would expand the use of fertility control as a means of population growth suppression. The BLM currently utilizes PZP as the primary fertility control vaccine, however it is only effective for 12 months and requires a follow up booster shot within the first 15-30 days which makes field application challenging.

To address this issue, the BLM has teamed-up with top universities and the U.S. Geological Survey to initiate a five-year, \$11 million research program to develop better management tools; longer lasting fertility-control vaccines; and effective, safe methods for spaying and neutering wild horses. The BLM's new fertility control research program involves a total of 21 research study projects at five universities – the University of Kentucky, Oregon State University, Colorado State University, Ohio State University, and Louisiana State University. The BLM is committed to moving beyond research and to implementation of tools that provide productive results by incorporating them into our population control strategy. Detailed information about each project has been posted on the BLM's website at:

[http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/whbprogram/science\\_and\\_research/usgs\\_partnership.html](http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/whbprogram/science_and_research/usgs_partnership.html)

### **Increasing Adoptions**

The BLM is currently working to increase placement of wild horses and burros to qualified adopters with improved programs and partnerships. Trained horses are more likely to be adopted when made available to the public. Toward that end, the BLM is working to boost the number of horses in training programs through partnerships with non-governmental organizations, such as the Mustang Heritage Foundation and Family Horses. Also, adoptions of wild horses and burros are now offered through the Internet and at more than 100 adoption events each year held all across the United States as well as at the BLM's holding facilities. The Mustang Heritage Foundation's popular "Extreme Mustang Makeovers" highlight the trainability and versatility of mustangs. Also, the Foundation places gentled mustangs in good homes through the BLM's Trainer Incentive program, which allows compensation for adoption of trained animals.

### **Transitioning from Off-Range Corrals to More Cost-Effective Pastures**

The BLM is also working to reduce the cost of caring for the animals that have been removed from the range by increasing the number of off-range horses that are cared for on open pastures, which are more cost effective than corrals. The BLM is proposing to acquire more off-range pastures through contracts with private parties in order to reduce numbers in higher-cost corrals.

### **Legislative Requests**

In addition, we are seeking help from the Congress. The President's FY 2017 budget includes a request for legislative authority to allow for the transfer of wild horses and burros to Federal, state and local agencies that have a legitimate need for work animals. The U.S. Border Patrol, the U.S. Military, and other agencies who are interested in using wild horses or burros in their work are unable to receive direct transfer of horses from the BLM. The U.S. Border Patrol, for instance, has used about 300 former wild horses over the past decade for their patrol efforts. However each of those animals must be adopted by individual members of the Patrol, in his or her personal capacity. The BLM wants to enable trusted agencies – who will commit to protecting and caring for the animals – to use these remarkable animals for important public purposes. We need Congress' help to make this possible.

The President's FY 2017 budget request also includes a legislative proposal for a congressionally chartered non-profit foundation for the BLM. A foundation would strengthen the BLM's efforts to link Americans to their public lands through an organization that would raise and spend private funds and foster constructive partnerships in support of the BLM's mission. A foundation could vastly expand the BLM's ability to work with partners to address the challenges facing the WH&B program and complement the agency's efforts to find animals good homes and to manage populations more effectively through expanded application of fertility treatments. The foundation would operate in a manner similar to the National Park Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the National Forest Foundation, all of which were approved by Congress.

### **Conclusion**

Addressing the multiple challenges of this program will require congressional, stakeholder, and agency leadership on a long-term, sustained basis. The BLM is committed to working with the Congress and stakeholders to develop a sustainable Wild Horse and Burro program. We welcome the Subcommittee's interest in the BLM's management of the program and we look forward to working with you to address these challenges.