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## 7 Preserves Envisioned to Manage Wild Horses

By [JIM ROBBINS](#)

HELENA, Mont. — Interior Secretary [Ken Salazar](#) said Wednesday that he was [proposing to create](#) seven new wild-horse preserves, including one in the East and one in the Midwest, to address the problem of a growing population crowding the Western range.

The [program](#), which also applies to wild burros, would expand the use of contraceptives and would geld more herds on public lands in the West, Mr. Salazar said.

The seven new preserves would accommodate some 25,000 non-reproducing horses. The preserves' size and exact sites have yet to be determined, however, and the entire program is subject to Congressional approval. A spokesman for Mr. Salazar had no estimate of the total cost but put the expense of creating the two preserves in the East and the Midwest alone at some \$96 million.

The goal is to reduce not only the 37,000 free roaming horses and burros in the West but also the 32,000 housed in corrals, where they must be fed and cared for at government expense. In 1971, there were just 25,000 wild horses and burros.

"The arid Western lands simply cannot support a population this large without significant damage," Mr. Salazar said from Washington in a conference call with reporters.

The welfare of wild horses, a resonant symbol of the Old West and pioneer history, remains a politically sensitive issue for Americans, and officials emphasized that the new program would not involve [euthanasia](#) or slaughter of horses, neither of which is permitted now.

Yet the proposal quickly drew criticism from wild-horse advocates. Ginger Kathrens of Colorado Springs, a maker of documentary films who has [chronicled](#) the lives of a wild-horse herd in Montana, said that blocking reproduction could alter the animals' behavior.

"It takes the wild out of wild-horse herds," she said. "They're families in sophisticated societies. Creating gelding herds and preventing them from reproducing is managing them toward extinction."

But ranchers, who see wild horses as competing with cattle for grasses and water, welcomed the proposal. Jeff Eisenberg, executive director for the Public Lands Council, a group that works on public lands issues for ranchers, said Mr. Salazar's proposal was a big step toward a solution.

"Horses are important, but people and their livelihood and food production are important, too," Mr. Eisenberg said. "We're for balance."

Mr. Salazar said the oversight structure for the new preserves had not been determined. He suggested that the federal government could enter into a partnership with figures like the wife of [T. Boone Pickens](#), Madeleine Pickens, who has shown an interest in creating a refuge for horses. Or the program may be solely government-administered, he said.

The [Interior Department](#) said the new preserves would improve conditions for horses that are now confined to crowded corrals and would curtail government spending on their care. "It's a savings to the taxpayer and better for the horses," Mr. Salazar said.

Unlike the 180 existing, unmanned federal wild-horse areas in the West, Mr. Salazar said, the new, staffed preserves would seek to draw visitors and promote environmental tourism. "We want to showcase the herds," he said.

But Ms. Kathrens, the wild-horse advocate, said the government should instead put a priority on reducing the millions of head of cattle that graze on public lands, so that horses would have more room.

In addition to the preserves, federal officials will try to loosen current rules under which wild horses and burros can be adopted, so that more people will be able to take one home.

"The public's demand for wild horses and burros has declined sharply," said Bob Abbey, director of the [Bureau of Land Management](#), an Interior Department agency.

The number of wild-horse foals is about 7,000 a year, and only 3,700 horses were adopted in 2008, down from 5,700 in 2005. One goal of the government's new approach is to bring the number of births down to the level of adoptions.

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