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## Abbey: Moratorium on Horse Gathers Is Untenable

By Bob Abbey

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In recent months, many Members of Congress have received e-mails, letters and phone calls from wild horse activists. These activists are waging an aggressive campaign, both in the federal courts and in the court of public opinion, that is aimed at stopping the Bureau of Land Management from gathering wild horses and burros from overpopulated herds on Western public rangelands.



With herd sizes growing at an average rate of 20 percent a year (thus doubling in size every four years), these removals are necessary to protect wildlife habitat, the horses themselves and the public rangelands from the environmental effects of herd overpopulation.

As it stands now, the free-roaming herd population of 38,400 exceeds by nearly 12,000 the number that the BLM has determined can exist in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses.

Unfortunately, the public's demand for adoptable and sale-eligible wild horses has declined sharply in recent years, leaving more than 34,000 off-the-range animals in corrals and pastures that must be kept running with taxpayer dollars — accounting for more than half the BLM's current wild horse and burro budget of \$63.9 million. (It should be noted that all wild horses and burros in holding, like those roaming the public rangelands, are protected by the BLM under the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act.)

Because of the BLM's spiraling off-the-range holding costs and the formidable challenge of dealing with unadopted horses, the Government Accountability Office recently found our agency's wild horse program to be at a "critical crossroads." In response, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and I announced an initiative last October as the first step toward putting the Wild Horse and Burro Program on a sustainable course.

The public has been invited to help shape this initiative by offering ideas to a Strategy Development Document that is posted on the BLM's home page and is open for comment until Sept. 3. Everything is on the table for discussion except two things: (1) the euthanasia of excess healthy horses for which there is no adoption demand and (2) the unrestricted sale of unadopted animals.

Although these controversial management authorities exist in the 1971 wild horse law, as amended, the Interior Department and the BLM will not consider those management options as part of the new strategy under development.

As work on this new management strategy unfolds, it is regrettable that false claims, misleading statements and false characterizations about the BLM's actions, motives and intentions relating to wild horse management are circulated on virtually a daily basis on the Internet by activists seeking a moratorium on wild horse roundups.

Such a moratorium is untenable. It would be devastating to the health of public rangelands and would be contrary to Section 1333 of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, which directs the BLM to determine whether an overpopulation of wild horses and burros exists, and, when making such a finding, to "immediately remove excess animals from the range so as to achieve appropriate management levels."

Lawmakers and their constituents concerned about wild horse issues should visit the BLM's home page ([blm.gov](http://blm.gov)) for accurate, timely information on the BLM's management of wild horses and burros. There they will find a link to detailed information on all aspects of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, including real-time information about ongoing or upcoming horse gathers.

One Web page, "Myths and Facts," debunks false allegations against the BLM, such as the claim that the bureau is selling or sending wild horses to slaughter. In fact, the GAO noted in an October 2008 report that the BLM is not in compliance with a December 2004 amendment to the 1971 wild horse law that directs the bureau to sell excess horses or burros "without limitation." The BLM has also established a presence on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to maximize our outreach to the American people on wild horse and other public land management issues.

The BLM respects the passion shown by activists pushing for a moratorium on wild horse roundups, but the debate over proper management must not be distorted by allegations and characterizations that have no factual basis.

The bureau is committed to the well-being of America's wild horses and burros, both on and off the range. By working to achieve appropriate management levels on Western public rangelands, the BLM will ensure that healthy herds can thrive on healthy public rangelands, both now and for generations to come.

**Bob Abbey is director of the Bureau of Land Management. Before his confirmation by the Senate in August 2009, Abbey had worked for more than 32 years in public service for state and federal land-management agencies, including eight years as the BLM's state director in Nevada, where nearly half of the nation's 38,400 BLM-managed wild horses and burros live.**

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