



Wild-horse advocates aren't doing the animals any favors

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If the Bureau of Land Management's numbers are correct, wild horse advocates are doing their charges no favors by delaying the BLM's plans to round up thousands of horses across the West in the coming months.

Left on the public range to fend for themselves, those horses quickly could run out of the forage they depend on for food, and, yes, many will die from starvation. So will other wildlife that can't compete with the horses for the already scarce resources.

And the BLM, accused of wildly overestimating the number of wild horses on the ranges and mistreating those it rounds up, will be blamed for that, too.

This battle, which has been going on for decades, is one that the BLM needs to win but cannot.

It's not a fair fight, of course.

The opponents of the roundups have the power of mythology on their side -- the romanticism of the free spirits racing across the West, a throwback to the days before man put up fences (although supporters of reducing the numbers of wild horses insist that most are simply horses that were once tame but either escaped their owners or were set free by those who didn't want them any more).

The BLM has ranchers (vilified for ruining the public lands with their cattle) on its side. It has hunters. It has rural residents.

But the opponents have Hollywood stars on their side. They have folks who love the idea of wild horses, even if they know little about the reality. They have children on their side. They have the Nevada quarter.

Also on the advocates' side is many years of the federal government's own ineffective and absurdly expensive efforts to control the wild horse population in Nevada and throughout the West.

The BLM's current estimate is that there are 37,000 wild horses and burros on public lands in the West, about half of them in Nevada. (Opponents of the roundup believe it's more like 15,000.) However, nearly that many, 34,000, are kept in government-run corrals and pastures. Already this year, the BLM has spent \$50 million to manage the wild horses in the West; last year, it was \$36 million. As the numbers increase, so do the costs.

Finally, the advocates have pictures on their side -- pictures of horses desperate to escape the terror of helicopters chasing them into pens and pictures of cowboys roping them and leading them into captivity.

Given all of that ammunition on the advocates' side, it's surprising that anyone spoke in favor of the roundups at the hearing held by the BLM's National Horse and Burro Advisory Board in Reno this week. Who wants to dash the dreams of children, after all? Who wants to destroy the "symbol of Nevada"?

Yet, it does no good to pretend there are no problems with giving the horses free rein throughout the West. Nor does it do any good to demonize anyone who argues that the horses need to be controlled, for their own good if for no other reason.

It's long past time to put an end to these disputes, which accomplish little beyond making the plight of the horses worse -- whether they're on the range or in government corrals. It's time to temper the romanticism with a little reality. It's time for a policy that may not make everyone happy (that's probably impossible under the circumstances) but will protect the horses from their own fecundity.

Leaving them to starve to death on the range is not the way to honor them.

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