

Abbey: Many myths in wild horse management debate

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The subject of wild horses prompts understandably emotional responses and, unfortunately, misinformation from some wild horse advocates who are critical of the Bureau of Land Management's management of these "living legends" of the American West.

These errors and false allegations serve neither the 37,000 wild horses and burros roaming Western public rangelands, nor the American taxpayer who underwrites the management of these iconic animals. Let me address a few of the more egregious claims that have shown up on the Internet in one form or another.

Myth 1: The BLM is selling or sending wild horses to slaughter.

Fact: This allegation is false. The BLM has not and does not sell or send wild horses to slaughter. That is why the Government Accountability Office, in a report issued in October 2008, found the BLM to be out of compliance with a provision in the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act that directs the bureau to sell excess horses or burros "without limitation" to any interested parties.

Myth 2: Everything would be fine if the BLM left wild horses and burros alone.

Fact: This is an untenable assertion, given that wild horse herds grow at an average annual rate of 20 percent a year, meaning herd sizes can double every four years. Western public rangelands simply cannot withstand the environmental impacts resulting from overpopulated herds.

Myth 3: The BLM removes wild horses to make room for more cattle grazing on public rangelands.

Fact: This claim is false. The BLM removes excess horses from overpopulated herds to ensure rangeland health. Authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed land has declined by nearly 50 percent since the 1940s.

Myth 4: Since 1971, the BLM has illegally taken away more than 19 million acres set aside for wild horses and burros.

Fact: This claim is false. No specific amount of acreage was "set aside" for the exclusive use of wild horses and burros under the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. Among the reasons why horses are no longer managed in certain areas where they were found roaming in 1971 is that much of the roaming land was private or state land not controlled by the BLM, and other areas -- because of drought or wildfire -- lacked sufficient forage and/or water to sustain horses and burros year-round.

Myth 5: The BLM is managing wild horse herds to extinction.

Fact: This charge is demonstrably false. The BLM is seeking to achieve the appropriate management level of 26,600 wild horses and burros on Western public rangelands, or 10,000 fewer than roam today. In 1971, when the BLM was given legal authority to protect and manage wild horses and burros, the number of wild horses was 17,300 mustangs (plus 8,045 burros), compared to today's on-the-range population of 33,100 wild horses (plus 3,800 burros).

More myths and the BLM's response to them can be found on our agency's Web site at www.blm.gov, as can details about Interior Secretary Ken Salazar's initiative to put the national wild horse and burro program on a sustainable track. The bottom line is that the BLM is committed to ensuring the health of the public rangelands so that the species that depend on them -- including wild horses and burros -- can thrive. By reaching appropriate management levels in currently overpopulated herds, the BLM will be able to preserve healthy wild horse herds on healthy Western rangelands as a legacy for the American people.

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