

## New attention to wild horses

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We continue to be encouraged by Ken Salazar's stewardship of public lands — and what's on them — since the Colorado senator became President Barack Obama's interior secretary.

Recently he's been getting a handle on one of the American West's greatest legends — the wild horses roaming the empty quarters.

Half a century ago, they faced extinction, fenced off the farmlands and cattle ranges and relegated to badlands only extractive-industry explorers could love.

Then came the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, providing them federal protection, and the earnest efforts of the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management. The mustangs' population flourished — to the point where they're destroying what passes for forage and many of them face starvation.

Adoption programs have spared many of them — but there are more than 30,000 of them wandering around the West. Most are in Nevada and Wyoming, but New Mexico still has 600 or so on the loose — maybe a tenth of their early-'70s population.

As Secretary Salazar noted recently, his department spends more than \$60 million a year on the wild horses and burros — about half of it feeding and caring for them in huge holding pens.

Oil-wealthy Madeleine Pickens is leading an effort to build a vast sanctuary, perhaps in northern Nevada, and Salazar would like to see sanctuaries farther east than the Great American Desert — perhaps as eco-touristic attractions.

However, some stockgrowers and others who see the herds as destroyers of land and water are still agitating for mass euthanasia — to the horror of humanitarian organizations.

But as The New Mexican's Staci Matlock reported last spring, a more civilized approach is in its infancy: contraceptive shots. With hay as a lure, mares in northwestern New Mexico were rounded up little by little, and injected before being freed. The contraceptive is 90 percent effective, although it's good for only a year or so.

Salazar appears impressed by this approach, and can be expected to direct such efforts in other states.

Overall, he figures, there must be a new emphasis on caring for the wild horses so they can live harmoniously on Western rangelands "for generations to come."

For good measure, he wants more adoptions — a tall order for an ever-more-urban America, especially as strapped as so many citizens are today.

There's nothing quite like the sight of a rumbling herd of mustangs to stir an environmentalist's — or most anyone else's — passion for the beauty of the West; thus the decades of activism on the horses' behalf. But along with that love for noble, if often bedraggled, steeds, has come lots of criticism of feds' efforts to manage the herds.

So we salute Secretary Salazar on his willingness, in what we hope is the early part of a long term, to take on such a high-profile cause.