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## Opposition to wild horse proposal is misguided

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Sometimes celebrities enter debates on controversial issues to draw special attention to their cause. Several stars, including Grammy-winning singer Sheryl Crow, oppose rounding up some wild horses in the West and transporting them to pastures in the Midwest and East.

At least we know Crow isn't doing it merely for the publicity. She has adopted a wild mustang through the Bureau of Land Management's program, so she obviously cares about the fate of these animals.

But she's misguided. Crow, actor Ed Harris, comedian Bill Maher and others charge the proposal is inhumane and unnecessary. It's clear that both of those terms could apply to the roundup alternative, which is to leave the horses to breed out of control.

The BLM, which Congress put in charge of managing wild horses and burros in 1971, says there are nearly 37,000 of the animals in the West, including about 4,500 in Wyoming. Federal officials estimate that's about 10,000 more than can exist in balance with other rangeland resources (remember, there are other species that have to share the land).

Another 32,000 wild horses have already been rounded up and sent to Western federal-run corrals and pastures, and those are nearly full. The BLM has spent about \$50 million this year to feed, corral and manage the nation's wild horses, up from \$36 million in 2008.

In addition to the increasing expense, the agency said the mustang population in 10 Western states is growing so rapidly that the horses are running out of food. For much of the past decade drought has ravaged the region until this year, when it finally ended in Wyoming.

Efforts to control the population one animal at a time, including a contraceptive vaccine, have been costly and time-consuming. Without contraception or other such measures, BLM officials say mustang herds can double in size about every four years.

Last year the agency announced a proposal to humanely kill some of the excess animals, but that proved so unpopular with wildlife advocates and the public that it was quickly dropped.

If euthanasia isn't a viable possibility, what is the federal government supposed to do with the wild horses? It would be irresponsible as well as inhumane to let the population grow until many of the animals starve to death.

Rounding up between 11,500 and 25,000 of the animals and sending them to up to seven preserves in the Midwest and East will no doubt be costly, but at least it allows for the animals to be fed and taken care of. Don Glenn, chief of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, said it's the alternative that makes the most sense in terms of water and forage. Many of the horses remaining on the range would be neutered, and reproduction in Western herds would be strictly limited.

Crow called Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, whose department includes the BLM, to voice her complaints. Told that something must be done because the horses are starving, she said, "We don't believe it." But simply denying the problem exists doesn't make it so.

"With one voice we are insisting that our government stop managing these beautiful and important animals to extinction," Crow said in a statement released by the Cloud Foundation, a Colorado Springs, Colo.-based horse advocacy program.

If the entertainer wants to preserve wild horses and keep them healthy, her time would be better spent trying to convince her fellow horse lovers to follow her example and adopt them.

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