

Alliance of Wild Horse Advocates  
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## **EDITORIAL OPINION**

### **Understanding the BLM Puzzle**

**Issue:** BLM's tendency to manipulate and/or misrepresent issues, figures and statistics with respect to its management of wild free-roaming horses and burros.

I have been associated in one way or another with the Bureau of Land Management since 1992. During that time I have met a number of dedicated personnel that worked for the BLM and at the same time observed policies and actions taken by the agency that I could only describe as baffling. I am not at all surprised that BLM's wild horse and burro program is presently in trouble.

If we were to attempt to study what went wrong at BLM we would need to focus on three areas: the bureaucracy itself, political manipulation, and honesty (or lack thereof.) It is in these three areas where I intend to share my experiences and observations.

The Bureau of Land Management is an incredibly large agency. It is also an Executive Branch agency. The person in charge of BLM answers to the Secretary of Interior who in turns answers to the President. In addition to that chain of command and responsibility, the BLM also has to answer to Congress since Congress authorizes money for the BLM, often with strings attached, and since Congress establishes laws that the BLM must ultimately follow. As a result, policies are often inspired and implemented by people who have little direct knowledge as to what is actually taking place on our public lands, or what needs to be done in order to maintain a credible program.

Every governmental agency is subject to political manipulation and the BLM is no exception. We see the agency finally getting something moving in the right direction and before it can produce results, the rules shift. Watching BLM occasionally reminds me of someone trying to run a railroad without knowing which tracks the trains can run on at any given time. It's one thing for politicians to be angry about an agency's performance. It's another thing to make things worse by insisting on changes without the necessary knowledge to understand what results those changes will produce. The most glaring example of destructive political manipulation involved Senator Conrad Burns' stealth rider. At a time when BLM was struggling to get its adoption program back on track, the Burns rider created a whole new boondoggle for BLM that the agency had to divert scarce resources to manage. Mercifully Senator Burns is no longer in Congress, however the problems he created are still with us.

However from my viewpoint the greatest impediment to BLM getting its house in order is a lack of honesty. As a society we have produced wonderful euphemisms for dishonesty: spin, tweaking the numbers, creative emphasis, etc. The bottom line is that the truth is the truth and lies are lies, and unless we're making decisions based on truthful information we are not likely to effectively resolve problems. It is on this element that I intend to elaborate.

Congress loves to blame BLM for the problems associated with its horse program. However Congress isn't being totally honest in its disapproval. While some legislators seem to take delight in bashing BLM about the head and shoulders over its horse program, it was Congress that failed to take action to repeal Senator Burns' act of deception. We in the trenches knew that Burns' Sale Authority wasn't going to work, yet BLM is still saddled with the burden of running two separate horse programs because Congress won't

correct one bad piece of stealth legislation. Perhaps to Congress this is not a problem. We taxpayers will continue to pick up the bill as we always have.

BLM isn't blameless either. Last year Henri Bisson experienced a bout of insanity by publicly suggesting that BLM was going to have to "euthanize" (destroy) some 30,000 horses in long term holding, a suggestion that no sensible person could believe would actually be allowed to happen. Nonetheless Bisson created yet another huge distraction at a time when what needed to be done was to get the BLM and advocacy groups working seriously together to get horses placed with adopters. As a result adoption numbers continued to fall. Earlier this year BLM's handling of the Pryor Mountains gather (Cloud's herd) was so inept that it drew international attention. More recently Interior Secretary Ken Salazar advanced a nonsensical notion of removing horses from western lands and relocating them to horse parks in the Midwest and East. This novel notion was laced with commentary as to how necessary it was to protect these wonderful icons, as well as fabricated numbers and false statements - including a bizarre claim that there are actually more free-roaming horses on public lands today than existed back in the 1970s.

People make mistakes. Big agencies can make big mistakes. So the problem I have with these examples (and many others) is that instead of acknowledging mistakes and taking corrective actions, folks at the upper reaches of BLM and the Department of Interior lean toward spin (a euphemism for "lie") to cover their tracks or simply pass the buck. If we can't acknowledge and recognize what is right and what is wrong, how can we ever expect things to improve? We certainly cannot expect that things will improve because someone tells us that they will.

Furthermore, some of these "mistakes" may actually involve criminal acts. In looking at the criminal investigation surrounding former Secretary of Interior Gale Norton, it may very well turn out that some of the perplexing decisions made by the Department of Interior and the BLM were actually the products of influence and corruption.

Here's the bottom line.

BLM's horse program is presently screwed up and totally upside down. The personnel who are actually trying to do a decent job remind me of the New Orleans pump operators when Katrina was bearing down on them. You can try as hard as you might, but you can't do your job if the system fails you. Both BLM and Congress need to accept their relative responsibility for things reaching the point that they are today. It is time to get back to the original intent of Congress and the American People and get the management of our public lands back on a credible track. The ROAM bill has the potential for fixing some of these issues, however it needs a little adjusting before it hits the floor of the Senate.

The "fixing" of BLM has to include an appropriate emphasis on getting horses that are standing around in holding corrals placed with adopters or moved into lower cost alternatives. Someone has to recognize that BLM can't do the job alone and must seriously engage the groups and organizations that can develop and motivate qualified adopters. Each horse placed with a competent private adopter shifts from being a burden to becoming an agricultural stimulus since each adopter chooses to redirect a portion of his/her disposable income to the local agricultural sector in maintaining and caring for his/her animal. Placement has to become a priority.

We also need to have an honest discussion regarding AMLs (Appropriate Management Levels - or the levels of horse populations that should be allowed to remain out on public ranges.) In this regard there are two competing points of view, both of which are correct yet must be reconciled.

Wild horse advocates argue (correctly) that Western public lands can support more horses than BLM's target AMLs. Yet BLM argues (correctly) that unless the agency reaches its target AMLs, it won't be able to keep up with the recruitment rate of western horse herds (overall population gain of births over deaths and removals.) What this contradiction illustrates is that there is no long-term solution to be achieved by continuing business as usual.

One unarguable fact is that BLM has failed to effectively carry out its mandate and the agency appears far more interested in manipulating facts and numbers and disinterested in implementing the kinds of changes that have to take place for the horse dilemma to be resolved. Another unarguable fact is if BLM doesn't get a grip on reality, public opinion and the attitudes within Congress will continue to turn against the agency.

In spite of Secretary Salazar's assertion, there is no magic pill that will resolve the problems associated with affordably sustaining healthy and viable horse herds on our Western ranges. It will take a multi faceted approach to get this program under control. The solution starts with accepting that wild free-roaming horses and burros are a legal component on our public lands and also accepting that it may likely be more cost-effective to scale back other public lands activities until horse population and management issues can be resolved. From there the BLM and advocates alike have to look at viable alternatives to "trap and toss" management, including expanding the concept of birth control (there is more to birth control than PZP,) adjusting mare / stallion ratios on certain ranges, leaving older animals with lower reproductive rates out on the range, and just playing straight with the program.

The current "crisis" in the wild horse program wasn't caused either by the horses or the taxpayers. It is now time for the horses and the taxpayers to stop being the victims of corruption, bad policies and dishonesty.

Note:

This commentary reflects the views of the writer who is solely responsible for its content.