

Talking Points and Observations

Conditions producing or contributing to the current conflicts regarding BLM's horse program

General Observations.

While it is arguable that BLM's wild horse and burro program has problems, spiraling costs and has drawn much criticism, the responsibility for these areas of concern does not lie solely with BLM. In many instances Congress has created new problems or exacerbated existing problems.

Range management priorities.

Horse and range management is a dynamic science that requires prioritization of resource use in accordance with a variety of Congressional mandates. Some mandates seem to conflict with each other. BLM is required to maintain a "thriving ecological balance" while management activities shall be conducted at the "minimal feasible level." In areas where horses are to be managed, required results are not likely to be sustained where ranges are managed for domestic livestock rather than designed for an equine-based ecology.

Managing for an equine-based ecology on multiple use lands does not necessitate removal of private livestock, however it requires somewhat of a different overall approach in order to more efficiently produce the results mandated by Congress.

Resource focused management.

BLM has traditionally let states dictate many resource decisions that are made on public lands. While BLM is certainly required to consult with various state agencies, ultimately it is the determination of the Secretary (of Interior) as to the disposition and allocation of resources found on Public Lands in accordance with Congressional requirements. Federal authority supersedes state and local authority. While we do not advocate for a "bully" Federal approach, clearly we have reached a point where the Secretary needs to assert his authority in order to make the wild horse program functional.

Overdependence on horse removals.

BLM has taken a single-track approach to horse herd management that relies on horse removals. While a few other options have been superficially explored, BLM is collecting horses at an alarming rate, producing a host of downstream problems.

The long-term financial implications of a policy where removals outstrip placement has become self-evident. If this trend continues more horses will be in holding than are out on the range. The resulting costs are open-ended and excessive. While horse removals will likely remain a necessary component of program management, for reasons of cost and Congressional mandate (management to the minimal extent necessary,) removals should be BLM's last resort approach, not their primary approach.

The removal process itself requires reevaluation. The recent Calico Mountains Complex gather has produced an extraordinary mortality rate among horses gathered, including young horses, mature horses and aborted (miscarried) foals. As of the morning of the "Truth Rally" BLM posted a cumulative total of 47 deaths of horses in the field and at the Indian Lakes facility, and an estimate of some 30+ "miscarriages" of pregnant mares. BLM's mortality rate is unacceptably high.

Mortality factors.

High mortality rate can be contributed to gather specifications. In past gathers BLM would either not bring in bands that were observed as having heavily pregnant mares or tiny foals, or such bands would be brought in slowly, assisted by outriders on horseback. Elder horses would have their tail hair bobbed by about one foot and be released. (The tail bobbing was performed so the pilot would not try to bring in the same horse again.) High-risk horses were not brought in to BLM facilities.

Elder horses are not highly productive breeders. They are nearing end stage so their individual impact on range resources is minimal. Without excess competition due to overpopulation (BLM's rationale for removing the horses in the first place) older horses tend to be more self-sustainable. When they die, they will provide food resources to other range animals. There is no rational reason to fill BLM holding facilities with horses in the 20+ age range.

Monitoring and Scoping.

When one reads Environmental Assessments and gather plans one is provided with monitoring and scoping data. BLM declares that "X" numbers of horses exist in an area, exceeding the established upper limit AML, and that "Y" numbers of horses have to be brought in to reduce the herd to low range AML. Repeatedly, as with the Calico Mountains Complex gather, the end results suggest that monitoring and scoping are faulty. The numbers of horses declared by BLM simply don't exist.

Furthermore a common argument is that the range cannot sustain more than the high range AML established for an area, yet (Using Calico as an example) in the same presentation BLM states that the range is carrying three times high range AML. If the range cannot sustain so many horses, how is the herd maintaining such a high recruitment rate? While there is some factual basis for a portion of BLM's argument, the agency's position is self-contradictory.

Gathers are extremely expensive. Calico Mountains approached \$2 million. Yet gather costs pale next to the costs of indeterminate long-term holding. Appropriate funding in order to accurately assess populations, range conditions, assign resource priorities, and make accurate determinations as to the source and extent of range problems is the most cost-effective way to conduct this program.

Birth control.

Birth control is at face value a sensible concept. It should reduce dependency on horse removals and can help reduce population growth while maximizing genetic diversity in a given herd. The simplified concept is that a more genetically diverse population of mares will each produce a smaller number of offspring over their lifetimes. However there are some fundamental flaws in BLM's approach to birth control.

BLM is fixated on the immunocontraceptive PZP. In general the Advocates have no quarrel with PZP. However the field of equine fertility control is evolving and there are alternatives that in some instances are likely to produce better results.

Advocate organizations are holding horses from a University of Nevada Reno study using a GnRH based immunocontraceptive. The results are encouraging on both mares and colts. Dr. Irwin Liu of the University of California, Davis, is developing a formulation that may be effective for up to seven years. If BLM is to take birth control seriously it has to follow the science. When advocates mention these new developments to BLM staff, they claim they have never heard of them. Such responses are ominous.

Mortality Review.

The mortality figures resulting from the Calico Mountains Complex gather could produce far reaching adverse consequences for BLM's horse program. It is imperative that BLM conduct a credible, thorough and transparent review of all of the procedures and practices at Calico starting at monitoring and scoping and ending at the Indian Lakes facility. In order to restore some semblance of public and Congressional confidence, BLM needs to publish a credible "Best Management Practices" plan to be used as a basis for designing future gathers.

Nevada has conducted relatively safe gathers in the past. Some advocates are concerned that people presently writing gather specifications and supervising gather operations do not have sufficient relevant expertise in Nevada's broad spectrum of range conditions and gather issues. It is not appropriate for public employees to develop their skills by needlessly killing horses.

Restocking.

The most expensive horse, in terms of taxpayer costs, staff time, etc., is the horse that is removed from the range and held long term. If BLM approached a bank with it's current program as a business model, the banker would politely show them the door. Yet we taxpayers (bankers) are saddled with a model that doesn't work and for which the costs appear infinite. Every alternative to trap and hold-for-life has to be explored with some degree of emphasis.

BLM talks about altering sex ratios, turn backs and other "warm and fuzzy" alternative approaches. However the hard reality, as evidenced in Calico, is that BLM removed everything that moved toward their traps except for those that died along the way, those that they shot, and one stallion that jumped out of the corrals and ran away.

Where is the sex ratio adjustment? Where is restocking horses from predator controlled herds with excess horses from overpopulated herds? Where is restocking non-breeding populations on currently "closed" HMAs where horses could legally be placed? BLM's methodology is based on running its roundup machine and begging Congress for more money when its way of doing business drives costs to the stratosphere.

Secretary Salazar's Magic Pill.

There is an old saying that if you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you need to do is throw away your shovel. However when BLM finds itself in a hole, it calls Congress and requisitions a backhoe.

While clearly BLM can't simply turn horses out all over the west, opportunities exist to place managed herds on appropriate public lands and use resources already owned by the government and taxpayers. In some instances Congress may be required to enact enabling legislation, however utilizing existing resources is considerably less costly than Secretary Salazar's proposal to establish (purchase and maintain, transport horses long distance, etc.) several new "sanctuaries" in the East to hold western horses.

The taxpayers typically don't benefit from such "magic pill" proposals. These ideas typically result in taxpayer funds simply being shifted from one group of contractors to another. The sanctuaries are not part of a rational business plan. BLM needs to focus on the resources that it already owns.

Adoption program.

The only aspect that has made financial sense in BLM's horse removal strategy has been its adoption program. This program has provided considerable economic stimulus to the agricultural sectors in the regions where horses and burros have been adopted. Horses and burros have been adopted in all 49 continental states and Washington, D.C. At the end of 2004 (the last year for which advocates have verified data) the adoption program had infused an estimated \$4 billion into local agricultural economies, a total from program inception to that date. This stimulus was from the disposable income that adopters chose to redirect from purchasing consumer goods (mostly foreign made) to the feeding, maintenance and care of their adopted animals (mostly locally or regionally produced.) Please see the attachment, *Contributions to State Agricultural Economies by Adopted Wild Horses and Burros*.

(It should be noted that the calculations presented in 2004 were based on average maintenance and care estimates produced by Sonoma State University. Recent estimates produced by Texas A&M put the current economic benefit at nearly twice the basis used for the 2004 report.)

Historically the greatest market potential exists among inexperienced first time adopters. For this reason many advocate organizations pursued a national "mentoring" and education agenda. In 2000 an informal survey of first time adopters that successfully engaged in the mentoring program produced astonishing results. Families (the total group of residents at a specific address) who had a successful and fulfilling first time adoption experience adopted an average of 3.6 animals from BLM, and/or similar agencies offering wild horses and burros, over a five-year period. Those figures suggest significant brand loyalty.

When money grew tight, funding for adopter skills development went by the wayside. This flawed strategy and false economy contributed to the decline in adoptions and spiraling holding costs.

Certainly the economy has an adverse impact on the "adoption market." However our experience in running nonprofit horse and burro adoption programs has been that adopter motivation is the primary placement force. When we generate positive publicity that motivates adopters, they come and take animals.

Until BLM refocuses on practical restoration of its adopter base - the average person motivated to take on a wild horse and the challenges (adventure) of gentling and training the animal - the long term holding problem is not likely to be humanely resolved.

Disclaimer: Part of the decline in adoption education has been technical in nature, insomuch as the Federal CCR payment system is not geared to enroll all volunteer organizations and non-profits as "contractors." This flaw in the payment system created a catch-22 for grass roots organizations to recoup their authorized expenses from BLM. Grass roots organizations are the ones who typically most effectively interface with potential adopters. This problem must be corrected.

Importance of private support groups.

For most potential adopters the fundamental concern regarding adopting involves confidence. "If I take a wild horse or burro home, can I gentle it and train it?"

No adoption program is successful without a support system. Such a correlation can be evidenced at the local animal shelter and the national Adopt-a-wild Horse and Burro Program. Successful adoptions typically result from effective teamwork - providing good quality horses at an adoption event, good marketing (advertising and PR) and a lot of groundwork provided by wild horse adopters and enthusiasts.

Example: After hurricanes Katrina and Rita ravaged the south, BLM held an adoption in Belton, TX. The results were pitiful with something like 18 animals placed. Two weeks later a combination event at Seguin, TX in partnership with LRTC, a Nevada based advocacy group' resulted in a 100% adoption of all 69 horses presented. The inventory included two "special needs" horses (one that was blind in one eye) and BLM adopted a horse that was on the list that missed the transport and wasn't even at the event.

Aside from not having to transport horses back to the facility to feed and care for, BLM's adoption income for this event was \$ 4,769.04 higher than the average received when placing a similar number of horses.

While clearly the support groups could not have created this degree of success without enthusiastic and professional performance of BLM's public affairs crew, it was the collaborative partnership that generated such a high degree of success. Regrettably BLM's current attitude towards advocacy groups discourages such opportunities.

Unnecessary alienation of important groups.

Maintaining enthusiasm among volunteers is akin to maintaining public confidence. BLM's public "face" has to be credible and caring. Volunteers will accept policy decisions that they don't necessarily agree with if they believe that the person making the decision is thoughtful, has actually considered the volunteers' concerns and positions, and is trying to make the best of whatever circumstances the BLM official has to deal with.

Conversely if the public persona of BLM appears aloof, condescending, dismissive of the public and advocates, and/or appears to be locked in a personal agenda, potential support groups will be alienated and public confidence will decline.

Unfortunately such opportunities for cooperation are often overshadowed by BLM personnel, typically people who are new to Nevada, who project a condescending "I have all the answers" attitude towards volunteers and advocates. Such conduct does not contribute to collective problem solving.

Tunnel vision.

Detractors of the wild horse advocacy camp are quick to point out, "The advocates can't even agree among themselves." This statement is intended to be derogatory. However those persons making such statements reveal how little they know about this issue by means of their mere utterances. The Alliance encourages freethinking, analysis, interpretation and concept development among its groups. It is through intellectual competition that the best ideas emerge, a fundamental American principle.

Conversely BLM tends to become infinitely anal-retentive, resisting new ideas and approaches unless the "preponderance of opinion" tends to support an emerging idea. The National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board should be a forum for developing solutions. Instead it is a platform for platitudes and posturing. If such circumstances weren't bad enough, people who might be capable of presenting innovative solutions are often limited to three minutes or less for their presentations, then their ideas are generally dismissed.

Under the current system, someone with a private agenda and political influence has a better chance of producing change within BLM's program than someone with a carefully researched and thoughtfully prepared proposal.

The Winecup Gamble proposal.

A fresh approach to horse management was presented by the Winecup Gamble ranch from Elko County. The ranch spent considerable effort and money to research and develop a practical and cost savings management plan. When advocates discuss the details of this proposal with people from BLM they might as well be discussing an expedition to Mars. Scientifically valid ideas must become part of the national "discussion," no matter what the source.

The elephant in the room.

Many of the problems associated with BLM's management strategies result from the influence of foal crops. Under BLM's myopic management viewpoint, 40,000 reproductive horses on public lands simply would produce twice as many foals as 20,000 horses, requiring twice as many removals and pouring a huge excess (numbers of horses gathered that exceed adoption placement opportunities) into long term holding. So BLM continues to reduce AMLs or zeroes out HMAs in hopes of bringing the breeding population down to something close to what their adoption program can absorb. This basic rationale sounds logical on the surface, however there are a few significant trip wires associated with it.

Placing increasing numbers of horses in indeterminate long term holding requires a huge amount of funding that could be better spent elsewhere in the program. Furthermore, birth rates of horses tend to increase when populations have been drawn down to well below the horses' territorial limits.

The impacts resulting from birth and recruitment rates become an issue that all sides to this conflict need to accept. However BLM's present strategies are not addressing this issue in any sustainable manner.

Disconnect and misdirection.

One of the most pervasive problems associated with public and advocate support for BLM's programs involves the typical disconnect between activities in the field and administrative personnel in Washington, D.C. These "bureaucrats" spout facts and figures that have no correlation to what people on the ground actually experience.

Here are some examples recently cited by such persons as Secretary Salazar and Director Abbey.

The horses have no predators. Perhaps Secretary Salazar should have attended last year's hearings at the Nevada Assembly Committee on Natural Resources, Agriculture and Mining. There was a big hullabaloo over half the state's trapping crew being cut for budget reasons. Cougars have become such a problem that one was struck on busy US-50 and a Carson City resident was attacked inside the state capitol's city limits.

The horses are starving. If the horses are starving (in contrast to thousands of photos) why are the ranges supporting up to three times the established "upper limit" populations? Elderly horses get skinny and die. They are not representative of the population as a whole. Like the boy that cried, "Wolf!" such constant claims cause the public and advocates to be skeptical when there is a real starvation issue.

There are more horses on the range than in 1972. This bit of misdirection, using someone's ballpark estimate rather than the subsequent "hard count," only plays to people looking for any excuse to remove horses. Documented data is too easily accessible via the internet. Advocates can easily prove that free-roaming populations have actually decreased over the life of the Act.

Advocates propagate myths. The idea here is to lead the public to conclude that BLM provides the facts and the advocates fabricate their case. BLM has been called down for using its own myths to counter what the agency claims are the advocates' myths.

The Advocates' call for a moratorium is a call to end all roundups. The overwhelming preponderance of information and positions presented by the mainstream advocacy organizations is not for the eventual end of all roundups. The call for a moratorium is intended to force a rational and effective evaluation of BLM's program and its activities, and produce a new strategy that does not rely on roundups as BLM's primary management tool, and that produces standards that make those roundups that are necessary consistently safer and more humane.

Horses are responsible for range damage. In the broadest context horses do have an impact on western ranges. However, many GAO and range biology reports suggesting that livestock damage has been inappropriately attributed to horses.

When the Secretary and Director go all across the country spreading myths, public and advocate confidence in BLM declines significantly.

Congress.

It is easy to assign all the blame to BLM for the problems associated with its horse program. However Congress is equally at fault for imposing impractical and sometimes conflicting requirements on BLM. This quandary was further exacerbated by the Burns Stealth Rider that imposed a new dysfunctional program on an already overextended agency.

It is evident that if the issue of calamitous wild horse management is to ever be successfully resolved, all the parties have to accept their respective responsibilities and come to grips with the present reality. Neither the BLM, advocacy camp or Congress can resolve this issue alone

The future.

Clearly the wild horse issue is not a simple issue to address and there is a complex roster of stakeholders. However if some rational focus and new direction are not established soon, this matter has no way to go but to get worse.

The foregoing information has been provided by members of the Alliance of Wild Horse Advocates.

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