

THE CASE FOR RESOURCE BASED WILD HORSE MANAGEMENT

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In 1999 the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service conducted a study of wild horses in the Virginia Range near Reno, NV. BLM had previously pulled out of the area due to urban development and had removed an agreed upon number of horses. Under Nevada statutes, the horses that remained fell under the custody of the state.

The NRCS was contacted to study and evaluate the herd and range resources, and to produce recommendations regarding the herd. The NRCS report was formally issued in 2001 and entitled *A Scientific Approach to Cooperative Wild Horse Management*.

The report concluded by listing a grazing capacity of 550 horses.

Presently there are over 1500 free-roaming horses on the Virginia Range. In spite of dire predictions that the horses would be starving and the range devoid of vegetation, the herd is robust and healthy and the concentration of grass in many areas has local residents concerned about fire danger.

In fact the county's fire department went on record requesting that a reasonable herd population be maintained in order to help mitigate the region's fire risk.

Why was the NRCS grazing capacity calculation so flawed?

A Scientific Approach to Cooperative Wild Horse Management



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To be fair, the study results were not incorrectly calculated. The problem was that the scope of the study was not realistic and did not take into account a number of factors that impacted herd birth rates and the carrying capacity of the range.

The NRCS studied a defined area and did not allow for migratory grazing activities that took place on other substantial portions of the range.

The NRCS did not account for fertility control activities that impacted birth rates.

The NRCS did not account for resource enhancements provided by nonprofit groups and private citizens.



A collaboration of efforts by private property owners, livestock owners, horse groups and private citizens facilitated activities that helped disburse the grazing pressure of the horses, reduce conflicts between horses and livestock operators, and reduce conflicts between horses and other human activities.

Provisions were made for nonprofit groups to provide approved supplementary feed during certain critical periods designed to prevent horses from overgrazing specific areas and to prevent horses from encroaching into residential areas.

A no-cost fertility control program directed by Dr. David Thain of the University of Nevada Reno School of Agriculture helped facilitate the release of 55 captured wild horses back onto the range.

We are not arguing that horse populations should not be reasonably managed and that horse populations should be allowed to increase unchecked. Our message is that actual experience demonstrates that studies are only as relevant as the criteria established for them, and greater focus on range resources coupled with sensible fertility control and cooperation between parties of interest can produce an increase in carrying capacity.

Horse Release Day



Wild horses at the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center



