



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

OCT 07 2009

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Leader:

I am writing to enlist your help to better protect the wild horses that are proud symbols of America's heritage and to better manage the open lands on which they roam.

Since 1971, when Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management has proudly managed the Nation's wild horses and burros. In four decades under the BLM's protection, wild horse populations that were once "fast disappearing from the American scene" have returned to rapid growth.

Now, wild horse herds and the landscapes on which they live face new challenges. As wild horses have no natural predators, the herds have grown substantially. The total wild horse and burro population is now approximately 69,000. This number includes approximately 37,000 currently roaming the public land, and approximately 32,000 held in expensive short-term corrals and long-term pastures. By contrast, in 1971 the total population was approximately 25,000.

Population increases have resulted in steadily increasing program costs – from \$38.8 million in Fiscal Year 2007, to \$53 million in Fiscal Year 2009, to a budget request of \$69 million for Fiscal Year 2010.

Additionally, arid western lands and watersheds cannot support a population this large without significant damage to the environment. To prevent starvation of animals and to protect the lands from over-grazing, the BLM each year moves thousands of wild horses to short-term corrals and long-term pastures.

The current path of the wild horse and burro program is not sustainable for the animals, the environment, or the taxpayer. The Government Accountability Office noted in a recent report that the wild horse and burro program is at a "critical crossroads," affirmed the need for action to control off-range holding costs, and recommended that the BLM work with Congress to find a responsible way to manage the increasing number of unadopted horses. The Senate Committee on Appropriations Report for the Department's Fiscal Year 2010 budget noted that gathering and holding costs "have risen beyond sustainable levels" and directed the BLM to prepare a long-term plan for the program.

To respond to these challenges, I am proposing to develop new approaches that will require bold efforts from the Administration and from Congress to put this program on a more sustainable track, enhance the conservation for these iconic animals, and provide better value for the taxpayer.

First, I propose that the United States establish a new set of wild horse preserves across the Nation, particularly on the productive grasslands of the Midwest and in the East. We must consider siting these preserves in areas outside the Western States because water and forage are extremely limited in the West, and drought and wildfire threaten both rangeland and animal health. These new preserves would be located on lands (or interests in lands) acquired by the BLM, and/or partners, and would be home to non-reproducing herds of wild horses. They would provide excellent opportunities to celebrate the historic significance of wild horses, showcase these animals to the American public, and serve as natural assets that support local tourism and economic activity.

The national wild horse preserves would be managed by the BLM or through cooperative agreements between the BLM and private non-profit organizations or other partners, thereby reducing our existing off-range holding costs and harnessing the considerable energy of our most enthusiastic wild horse supporters. We would also explore the availability of new grazing areas that could accommodate a large number of wild horses and could be managed through partnerships with existing conservation programs. Partners could also contribute to the wild horse and burro program by promoting adoptions.

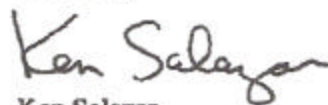
Second, to showcase the unique herds on public lands in the West that deserve special recognition, I propose to highlight those special herds with Secretarial or possibly Congressional designations. Special designations would highlight the unique qualities of America's wild horses, providing a focal point for publicity and increased eco-tourism that could boost the economies of nearby rural communities.

Finally, I propose new strategies to ensure that the herds on our western rangelands are kept at more sustainable levels. We must balance population growth rates with adoption demand. Only by reducing breeding populations of wild horses on western rangelands will this program come into balance. This will require the aggressive use of fertility control, active management of sex ratios on the range, and possibly the introduction of non-reproducing herds in some existing herd management areas. At the same time, we must also place more animals into good homes by making our adoptions more flexible where appropriate.

These proposals set forth my vision for responding to Congress and GAO's direction to address the many challenges facing the wild horse and burro program. I am confident that these measures can provide a truly national solution to a concern that is not limited to the West. They will restore balance and health to our wild horse and burro herds, improve the management of the program, promote rangeland health, and create a lasting conservation legacy for these iconic animals.

These proposals are subject to Congressional approval and appropriations. I look forward to discussing them with you and other members of Congress as we work together to protect and manage America's "Living Legends."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Salazar". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ken Salazar