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Horse-Slaughtering Law Alarms Activists AP Associated Press

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By SCOTT SONNER, Associated Press Writer

RENO, Nev. - For the first time in more than a generation, the mustang — the very symbol of the American West — can be slaughtered for horsemeat.



[AP Photo](#)

In December, Congress repealed the 34-year-old ban on the slaughter of the wild horses that run free across the West. The move has brought a powerful backlash from activists, who want to reinstate full protection for the mustangs.

"It is really a slap in the face to the American people," said Betty Kelly, co-founder of the horse protection group Wild Horse Spirit in Virginia City, Nev.

Acting on behalf of ranchers who say the horses eat forage needed by cattle, Sen. Conrad Burns ([news](#), [bio](#), [voting record](#)), R-Mont., attached the amendment in December to a spending bill that President Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) signed into law.

It allows for the sale for slaughter of some older and unwanted horses that are captured during the periodic government roundups aimed at reducing the wild population, now estimated at 33,000 across 10 Western states. About 19,000 of the horses are in Nevada.

A bill to reinstate the slaughter ban was introduced in Congress last month.

Responsibility for rounding up horses on federal land and selling them rests with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management ([news](#) - [web sites](#)), which has yet to send any of the animals to slaughter.

BLM officials said the agency is reaching out to animal protection groups and is optimistic that before the summer, it will find new homes for the 8,900 horses and burros that could be subject to slaughter.

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"We realize it is a challenge, but we think there are owners out there that would provide the kind of care we are looking for," BLM spokesman Tom Gorey said from Washington, D.C.

The issue has dogged the Interior Department and Congress since Nevada's Velma Johnson, also known as Wild Horse Annie, and a legion of schoolchildren persuaded Congress to outlaw the use of motor vehicles to hunt the mustangs in 1959. That was followed by the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act of 1971.

Sylvia Fascio, a fifth-generation Nevada horse breeder, said there are too many wild horses roaming the BLM land next to her ranch, and some should be sold for slaughter.

"I enjoy the wild horses. I'm blessed to live out here among them and it's a very romantic thought. But there is such a thing as reality," Fascio said. "Since they can't seem to find homes for all of these horses all of the time, there is only one thing left. There are foreign countries that eat horsemeat. We don't now, but we did during World War II. I see nothing wrong with that."

The fate of the horses is also a question of cultural values, according to Mike Schroeder, a Washington state wildlife biologist. "I think of them more as livestock. But a lot of tribes I work with think of them as wildlife that should not be touched," he said in a speech to a Western Governors Association conference earlier this month.

It is a volatile issue. Scott Freeman, a defense attorney in Reno, defended one of three young men who were accused — and eventually acquitted of most charges — in the 1998 shooting deaths of 33 horses on the edge of Reno. The shootings outraged animal protection groups around the world and led to death threats against Freeman.

"I have lots of experience doing homicide cases, but I have never experienced the emotional outburst I did with the horse case," he said. "The rallying cry was for the defenseless animals and that the individuals — who in my case turned out to be innocent — should basically be strung up."

Burns said the repeal of the slaughter ban is necessary to manage the herds and protect the range. The measure allows the sale of horses more than 10 years old, as well as any that go unadopted three offerings in a row.

The BLM said it believes the 37,000 free-roaming wild horses and burros on the range are about 9,000 more than natural food supplies can sustain. Its aim is to bring the population down to about 28,000.

BLM Director Kathleen Clarke said the agency already is getting some responses in its effort to find homes for the animals and hopes to find a solution "in a way we feel good about."

On the Net:

<http://www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov>

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