

Americas Mustangs & Burros



**What's Left,
The High Costs of Miscalculating
And Will They Survive?**

By C.R. MacDonald

FORWARD

Since 1971, when wild horses and burros became a protected species, the answer to one of the most consistently pressing questions everyone wants and needs to know is – how many are really out on the range?

This fundamental question is at the heart of management for healthy rangelands, proper forage allocations as well as the financial costs of managing Americas wild free-roaming horse and burro herds.

When the Bureau of Land Management launched the 4 Year Healthy Rangeland Initiative that began a national campaign targeted at removing large numbers of mustangs and burros from public lands to protect the thriving ecological balance, despite BLMs concentrated effort to reduce wild equid populations, BLM has continued to report populations have remained relatively static in relation to their efforts.

As a result, public concern has continued to grow about both the number of wild horses and burros being taken both of the range and those that actually remain.

Recently, BLM has recently released the Fiscal Year 2008 National Herd Statistics for the Wild Horse & Burro Program. According to BLM, as of February 29th, 2008, approximately 33,000 wild horses and burros are reported as still roaming public lands, over 6,000 animals above what BLM has deemed is “appropriate use” established through their national Allowable Management Level (AML).

Of even further significance is approximately 33,000 wild horses and burros that now clog adoption pipelines and long-term holding facilities causing BLM to declare the costs of Wild Horse and Burro Program has now escalated out of control and BLM has reached their financial limits trying to manage the program on the currently allocated budget.

As a result, on June 30th, 2008, BLM announced the National Wild Horse and Burro Program has reached a crisis of epic proportions with only three viable solutions available to solve the financial quagmire they have found themselves in – either give them more money, grant them the authority to grant Instant Title to those who would take Americas wild horses and burros directly to slaughter or allow them to euthanize them, both on and off the range.

While the suggestion was put forth to stop the round ups until the financial pressure of the now warehoused wild horses and burros can be relieved through adoptions, BLM argues that adoptions have continued to drop throughout the program as a whole and with the current economic downturn, BLM projects demands for adoptions will continue to decline.

BLM also argues that a moratorium on round ups will result in wild horse and burro populations beginning to accelerate again if they are allowed to exceed BLMs established management levels, which in turn would increase damage, deterioration and degradation to public lands and resources due to their multiplying numbers and resulting overpopulations.

However, statistical analysis concluded the current crisis in the National Wild Horse & Burro Program has been manufactured through taking approximately 11,000 to 14,000 more wild horses and burros off the range than was necessary, which just happens to be around the same amount of warehoused wild horses and burros currently causing the financial crisis.

While BLM claims 33,000 wild horses and burros are still on the range as of February 29, 2008, an independent review based on their own reported population levels, reproduction rates and removals, found **the most likely wild horse and burro population still remaining on the range is only 13,500 ~ 20,000 less than BLM is reporting.**

Is there a way to actually prove what's left?

No, not without a reasonably accurate population count method as well as initiating a mass physical census of the remaining populations. With BLM still struggling as to the accuracy of their census methods and the off chance that Congress would contract a mass population count by an unbiased and independent firm, the reality of actually, physically proving the remaining wild horse and burro populations across the West is almost zero.

But what can be done is to use the same reported populations, the same reproduction rates and the same reported removal numbers BLM uses to form their conclusions and management strategies, then analyze those numbers according to their same methods but through an independent and objective process.

This is a reasonable alternative, as it is based on the same methods BLM applies – just with radically different results than BLM has been reporting.

Even in analysis that allowed BLMs reported numbers every possible benefit of the doubt, such as using obviously inflated population totals, generally high reproduction rates, and highly skewed removal ratios, **the absolute best case scenario showed only 16,800 remained as of February 29th, 2008, still 50% less than BLMs own population reports.**

Despite the repeated claims that wild horses and burros have been, and still are excessive in relation to BLMs national population objectives, analysis of the numbers fails to support BLMs claims by a large margin. In fact, statistics reveal what's actually left of Americas remaining herds, as well as the management techniques implemented and being proposed, have now put them in serious danger of multiple population crashes on a nationwide scale.

While the temptation may exist to dismiss this conclusion as “extreme” and we can only speculate as to why BLMs population counts fail to add up, the analysis, methods, research, data and numbers support this conclusion, extreme or not.

As BLMs management of the National Wild Horse and Burro Program has been coming increasingly under fire and public scrutiny, recently BLM has been pointing to flaws in population census methods and aerial survey techniques being insufficient to accurately gauge free-roaming wild horse and burro populations.

However, it must be pointed out, counting wild horses and burros from the air is not the only tool BLM is required to use in wild horse and burro management to gauge population levels.

As stated before, accurate evaluations of wild horse and burro use in relation to their actual use is at the very heart of BLMs legal authority to conduct removals by how many wild horses and burros are actually utilizing natural resources.

If there has been approximately 50% more wild horses and burros actually utilizing the range than BLM has previously been aware of, this indicates serious flaws in the monitoring data used to set wild horse and burro resource allocations and the national population objectives.

Consequently, if BLM continues to maintain there are still 33,000 wild horses and burros on the range, despite their massive removal efforts over the last seven years, obviously the target populations BLM established for wild horse and burro populations were actually reflective of resource utilizations from populations twice as large as BLM has been recording all these years.

In other words, if BLM had determined the carrying capacity for a particular area could only support 100 wild horses or burros, they would set a maximum population level, known as an AML of 100. BLM has maintained that once a herd began to exceed this population level, they would begin to exceed the limits of the areas resources and resource damage would begin to occur.

Yet if BLM was failing to recognize half of the actual wild horse or burro population as they are now implying, this means the established AML of 100 was actually reflecting a population twice that size, or in this example case, 200 wild horses and burros were present before they began exceeding the range's carrying capacity to support them, not the 100 wild horses and burros BLM initially thought were there.

Either way, whether through deliberate sabotage by BLM taking off thousands of wild horses and burros of the range than was necessary or through establishing resource utilizations that failed to accurately gauge wild equid populations, the conclusion remains the same –

BLM has removed thousands more wild horses and burros than was necessary.

While BLM is attempting to focus the public's attention on "what" should be done about BLMs reports of "excess" wild horses and burros, the first question the public should really be asking is, does BLMs data back up their claims?

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