Bureau of Land Management Wild Horse and Burro Program: Welfare on the Range

Boyd M. Spratling, DVM

The well-being of wild horses and burros has been addressed and continually reviewed with policies updated by the Bureau of Land Management. One area of concern is the lack of discussion for the welfare of horses on the range. Ironically, the intent of the 1971 Wild Horse and Burro Act was to address these free-roaming animals and their ranges. Other areas of horse management have had close scrutiny, but more needs to be directed toward the actual free-roaming animals. Author’s address: Co-Chair National BLM Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board, PO Box 27, Deeth, NV 89823; e-mail: boyddvm@wellsrec.net. © 2012 AAEP.

1. Introduction
The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has gather plans based on the population’s Appropriate Management Level (AML) for a given Horse Management Area (HMA) and is supported by data correlating horse numbers to the potential for forage production. Requirements for a healthy range and other multiple uses of the public lands must also be taken into account. Many public groups and individuals demand that the BLM stop all gathers, removals, and manipulation of reproductive potential. These demands, using both legal and political means, are made with the intent to improve conditions for the wild and free-roaming horse. Actually, the lack of proactive management leads to expansion of both populations and territory. As long as the range, stock water, and forage are adequate, the horse numbers will escalate. As has happened in the past, excess horse populations have led to deteriorating forage, soil, and water, resulting in the decline of wildlife numbers, soil erosion, and eventual collapse of the horse herd. Accelerators of this process include drought, harsh winter, and massive wildfire.

2. Key Points/Discussion
Wild Horses and Burros in the West are provided for through the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971. Other amendments have been passed since then that have added the ability to use helicopters for horse gathers or to have unlimited sale authority. This provision allows the BLM to sell wild horses without restrictions on the buyer, but the BLM has self-imposed a policy to require the buyer to promise that the horses will not go to slaughter. The law essentially requires the BLM to manage wild horses where they existed in 1971. Its charge is to protect, manage, and control these animals to ensure healthy herd populations at levels, consistent with the land’s capacity to support them, and to achieve and maintain a thriving ecological balance, in combination with other multiple uses. The law requires horses without an adoption demand to be disposed of in a humane manner. Unfortunately, social, fiscal, and political pressures have taken cur-
rent BLM policy in a direction that conflicts with this statutory and regulatory authority. At this time, the BLM uses no other outlet for unadoptable animals aside from placing them in long-term holding. There will soon be potential for placement in eco-sanctuaries, the rules for which are still being formulated.

A sharp focus and discussion have been lacking in regard to on the range health and welfare for the horses. The well-being and sustainability of wild horses on the Western rangelands is dependent on the health of the watershed itself. Because herds are on the land every day throughout the year, the AML must be set and maintained to accommodate their foraging as well as other multiple uses during all seasons, taking into consideration the probability of drought, extreme winter, or wildfire. In 2006, Nevada burned 1.3 million acres, leaving many HMAs drastically deficient of forage going into the winter season. Horse management does not lend itself well to duration of grazing or season of grazing. These are basic principles of range management used to ensure that forage can be harvested while allowing plants to recover for the next year's use in a sustainable fashion. Because horses are on the same range throughout the year without rest or rotation of pastures, there is no opportunity for vegetative recovery or healing of riparian areas. Limited or fluctuating stock water availability only worsens the situation. Therefore, proactive population control is the only weapon against the cycle of rapid population expansion followed by habitat degradation and animal die off, both of horses and wildlife.

Currently, the free-roaming population in the West stands at 37,500 head. The national AML is set at 26,600 horses and burros. Population growth is minimally due to intentional release of domestic horses in some areas, but, by far, the greatest increase in horse numbers is due to the reproductive potential of 20% to 25% of the horses annually, without an adequate means of removing the excess. Unfortunately, gather strategies are changing toward maintaining that disparity rather than reducing numbers to the national AML. The main causes are both political pressure and reductions in budget dollars available for the gathers. Many are concerned that the delay in reaching AML will be detrimental to the rangeland resource. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) validated this concern by stating: “Clearly the mission of the BLM Program—Healthy Ranges, Healthy Horses—is not a simple one. A central issue for all discussions involving the care and management of the wild horse population is controlling the reproductive rate of the wild horses on the range. The AAEP encourages the BLM to prioritize research and application of effective fertility control methods in order to reduce the foaling rate in wild herds.”

Historically, the main population control method has been to gather excess horses (those over the designated AML) and offer them for adoption by the public. Many practicing veterinarians have attended to these adopted horses and have seen the full spectrum of consequences. In recent years, the adoption demand has fallen behind the needed removal number, in order to maintain ecological balance on the rangelands. Adoptions are declining and are averaging 4,000 animals per year, and removals from the rangeland via gathers have been about 10,000 head per year. This has led to an increase in the number of horses kept in long-term pastures, which are used for horses with no adoption demand. Once sent to a long-term pasture, horses will remain there for the remainder of their lives. Consequently, the number of horses held in short-term facilities or long-term pastures has exploded to nearly 50,000 head, costing the program nearly 60% of its $78 million annual budget. The total cost of a fully prepared prospective adoptee is $2,000, and, if unsuccessful, the lifetime holding costs per horse soar to $11,000. Finding parity between free-roaming horse numbers and ecological balance is becoming more and more difficult. Users of the public lands in the West fear resources may be sacrificed to the detriment of wildlife, habitat, and other multiple uses. Adding to the uncertainty are forced changes to Federal land management that will be instituted if the Greater Sage Grouse is listed as threatened or endangered. Significant numbers of HMAs and potential Sage Grouse priority habitat overlap extensively throughout the West. Because the Endangered Species Act supersedes all other uses of the land, both public and private, onerous restriction and new regulation will result in management changes for all public land uses, including impact by wild horses and burros.

Current and future strategies at the BLM emphasize reproductive manipulation, primarily focusing on mares, through catch, treat, and release actions rather than total removals.

Listed are strategies for reducing reproductive capability:

- Immunocontraception
  - PZP 22 (Porcine Zona Pellucida)
  - Spay-Vac
- Adjusting sex ratios favoring males in some HMAs
- Castration, epididymectomy, or vasectomy of stallions
- Spaying of mares
- Research for chemical sterilization
- Nonreproducing herds in specific HMAs (this is accomplished by gathering then releasing only geldings, stallions, or spayed mares back into the HMA)

Many believe that mares should be the focus of manipulation, but geldings could become an impor-
tant facet in instituting nonreproducing herds in chosen HMAs. Unfortunately, widespread use of these practices is not occurring at an effective rate. Reasons vary from legal protests to bureaucratic lethargy in approval of immunocontraceptives at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Recommendations by the Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board (WH&B) to dramatically increase use of immunocontraceptives date back to 1999. Planned treatments in fiscal year 2012 project only 883 mares to be injected with PZP 22. Duration of effectiveness for PZP 22 is about 2 years, if given late in the fall, and the cost per dose is about $350.2 Considering the difficulty and cost of regathering biennially, the use of PZP 22 does not fulfill the needs of population management. Spay-Vac appears to at least double the duration of PZP 22, but EPA approval and widespread use on the range is years away. Approving immunocontraceptives with multiple-year effectiveness requires years of study to predict safety and effectiveness.

A new strategy being evaluated by the BLM includes water or bait-trapping of horses by private contractors. Baiting of burros has been used successfully by BLM staff in areas of Arizona for years. This process would be expanded into many other HMAs in the West as a means of cost reduction for capture and relieving the public concerns about large-scale gather by helicopter. Logistical processes are yet to be worked out, and humane oversight of numerous contractors would be challenging, but potential cost reduction is possible. The fate of the captured animals would then follow the same decision process of other gathered horses.

One should ask, how does this relate to animal welfare? Allowing the horses to suffer from starvation or lack of water is truly an abuse. Continual proactive management is preferable to the harsh harvest invoked by mother nature. The BLM has invited numerous federal and private organizations to observe and submit recommendations to improve and modify agency policies and procedures in all phases of the program. The majority of these activities centered around what was best for the animal, including gathers, facilities, structural improvements, handling procedures, veterinary medicine, transport, adoptions, compliance, and end-of-life policy. The American Horse Protection Association5 and the AAEP3 have been both generous and expert in responding to requests for input by the BLM. Reading their final reports from 2010 and 2011 is enlightening and beneficial, and those will be essential in modification of future BLM policy. One fact that supports the claim of humane treatment during the gather process is that the mortality or euthanasia rate due to injury stands at 0.23%, which is well below the mortality rate for capture of other wildlife.6 Continual future monitoring by qualified independent observers is the key to improvement for the program.

3. Conclusions

The cost of holding captured horses has grown to the point that basic on-the-range monitoring of horses and range improvement functions receive limited financial support. Suppressing population growth, achieving AML, and expediting the approval of immunocontraceptives are crucial to attaining sustainable and healthy herds. Congress, the BLM, and the public understand that these current trends in animal holding costs are unsustainable. The dilemma is finding a balance between proper resource management, which is a mandate for the BLM, and healthy horse numbers. The grim reality is that the BLM may need to consider the recommendation of the 2008 Government Accountability Office report, which states that the only two legal options for dealing with unadoptable animals are to humanely destroy them or to sell them without limitation. Political and emotional minefields lay ahead for the BLM.

References

2. FY 2012 February Annual Work Plan, Presented at the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board meeting, April 23–24, 2012 Reno, Nevada.
4. Facility Summary, Presented at the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board Meeting, April 23–24, 2012, Reno, Nevada.