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[House turns to wild horse conservation bill as GOP protests price tag](#)

Allison Winter, E&E

July 17, 2009

The House is expected to take up legislation today that seeks to protect wild horses and burros under federal care, but Republicans are bashing the bill as a waste of federal resources in the midst of tough economic times for many Americans.

The bill, [H.R. 1018](#), calls for a comprehensive new strategy to manage the roughly 34,000 horses and burros under the care of the Bureau of Land Management. BLM announced last year that it may have to start slaughtering thousands of the animals due to inadequate funding and space to care for them.

Besides prohibiting the culling of wild horses and burros, the legislation from House Natural Resources Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) would remove the limitations on areas the animals can roam, bolster BLM's wild horse and burro adoption program, and facilitate the creation of sanctuaries for wild horse and burro populations on federal lands. The 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act established 52 million acres of habitat for the horses, but Rahall says 19 million acres of that have been lost -- a trend he wants to reverse with the bill.

Lawmakers have been debating the question of how to manage the growing wild herd for years and high-profile advocates, such as Willie Nelson and Bo Derek, have rallied behind efforts to stop the slaughter of the animals.

House lawmakers approved a bill in 2007 that would have banned the sale or slaughter of the horses -- over the objection of many Western lawmakers from both sides of the aisle, including Rep. John Salazar (D-Colo.). The legislation never progressed in the Senate. Rahall's new bill goes beyond that ban to also expand conservation programs for the horses.

Western lawmakers have argued that a ban on slaughter does not take into account the reality of a species that has no natural predators left and has far exceeded its habitat. Western GOP members of the Natural Resources Committee say Rahall's new proposal could place a lopsided burden on their lands, since the horses mostly roam in the West. But Republican lawmakers are planning a new tact in criticizing the proposal on the House floor today.

Resources Committee ranking member Doc Hastings (R-Wash.) plans to attack the bill's

pricetag, criticizing it as a "\$700 million welfare program for wild horses" that comes at a time when he thinks the federal government should focus more of its resources on deficit reduction or job creation.

"There are serious issues facing our country right now and it's absurd that Democratic leaders believe that spending \$700 million to pamper wild horses is the best use of our time and Americans' tax dollars," Hastings said in a statement yesterday. "Instead of restoring American mustangs, let's restore American jobs and put the horsepower back into our economy."

Hastings plans to make that argument on the House floor today, according to his aides. He also plans to offer an [amendment](#) that would basically throw out Rahall's new legislation and replace it with the 2007 bill that banned the commercial sale and slaughter of wild horses without the extra conservation measures.

He says the more narrow 2007 legislation would save the federal government hundreds of millions of dollars in new conservation spending.

Rahall's bill includes no direct spending or authorizations. But the Congressional Budget Office estimated that it would cost the BLM \$200 million over the next four years to implement the act. CBO also estimated it would cost \$140 million a year, beginning in 2013, to purchase new land to increase the range of the herds. The costs of acquiring additional acreage could be as high as \$500 million, according to CBO.

But Rahall aides say the final version of the bill would not cost as much as CBO estimated. Rahall plans to offer a manager's amendment that would make the land acquisition portion of the bill optional -- setting it as a goal, not a mandate.

"This goal can be met using federal land at little or no cost to taxpayers," Rahall spokeswoman Allyson Groff said yesterday.

Rahall will also argue that the management tools contained in the legislation -- such as more adoptions and contraception for horses -- would save money in the long-term, since BLM is already spending millions of dollars every year on wild horse management. Groff added: "The status quo is both more expensive and less humane, and must not be allowed to continue."

A report last year from the Government Accountability Office recommended that lawmakers find new options for long-term management of the horses. BLM's spending on short- and long-term holding of horses has increased from \$7 million in 2000, about 46 percent of the program's direct costs, to nearly \$21 million in 2007, 67 percent of the program's direct costs, according to GAO.

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