

DISSENTING VIEWS

The Wild Horse and Burro Program of the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service is not working well, and although this bill would dramatically change the program, the proposed changes will not be for the better.

This legislation would expand wild horse and burro populations to all public land and greatly complicate management of wild horse and burro herds by limiting the methods by which the federal agencies can manage the herds and mitigate the damage done to native plants, wildlife and rangeland. We are concerned that expanding the range of free-roaming horses and burros to all public lands will have devastating impacts on rangeland health, damage riparian areas, and threaten long-term sustainability of native fish and wildlife resources and their habitat.

The Wild, Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 gave the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture authority to manage wild horses and burros on BLM and National Forest rangelands to protect the herds and ensure healthy rangelands. But with no natural predators, the wild horse and burro populations have grown significantly each year. Wild horses and burros can increase their population at a rate of 15–20% per year, resulting in a population doubling in size every three to four years.

BLM currently manages over 34,000 horses and burros in 181 herd management areas in 10 western states. This population level far exceeds the scientifically determined Appropriate Management Level (AML) or the optimum number of animals on the range of about 27,200 animals. Under current law, where an overpopulation exists, the Secretary is to protect the health of both the herd and the range by removing excess animals to restore a “thriving natural ecological balance” to the range and protect the range from the deterioration associated with overpopulation. As a result, BLM must remove thousands of animals from Western public rangelands each year to ensure that herd sizes are consistent with the land’s capacity to support them. The 1971 Act requires the BLM to manage wild horse and burro populations only in the areas where they were found when the law was passed in 1971. These current herd management areas cover a vast area, over 32.6 million acres in ten states, an area bigger than the state of New York. H.R. 1018 would allow these animals to *expand* beyond their current herd management areas to *all public lands*.

Since 2001, over 79,000 animals have been removed from the range. Adoptions and sales of the animals, however, have declined over that same time period. Only 47,000 animals have been placed in private care since 2001. Additionally, extensive attempts to employ birth control technologies have proven expensive, very difficult to administer and ineffective. BLM now holds close to 33,000 un-

adopted animals, up from 9,807 in 2001. Last year's holding costs accounted for nearly 75% of the program's enacted appropriation.

Clearly, changes in the program are needed. Unfortunately, instead of correcting the problems in the current program, this bill compounds its failures by requiring that wild horses and burros be considered an "integral part of the natural system" on all public lands, not just the areas where they were found when the Act was enacted in 1971. Because rangelands are finite, reductions in forage for wildlife—including endangered species—and reduced allocations for cattle are expected in areas where wild horse and burro herds are expanded. Wild horses are particularly aggressive in defending scarce water sources against use by native wildlife in the critically water-short rangeland of the West.

Unfortunately, the Committee rejected efforts during mark-up to strengthen the bill by adding scientific range management and "look before you leap" provisions. Amendments for studying the impacts on rangeland before creating new wild horse and burro sanctuaries and balancing the advisory panels by adding members with actual range management experience in the affected states were rejected. An amendment to include two representatives of existing grazing boards on the advisory panels was turned down based on the erroneous claim that they are state employees. Questions about where the new sanctuaries would be located and whether or not the bill's ban on "commercial" use of adopted horses bars their use on farms and ranches were left unanswered.

Much as we appreciate the role wild horses play in the romance and mythology of the American West, we believe the laws governing the management of our public lands need to be based on firmer ground. Our goal should be to devise a real-world management program in which healthy herds of these non-native, feral animals thrive in their allotted habitat in a balanced, self-sustaining relationship with the land, vegetation, human activities and wildlife. Unfortunately, the well-meaning but misguided policies contained in H.R. 1018, do not take us in that direction.

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