Steve Tryon
Deputy Assistant Director for Resources and Planning
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining
July 16, 2019

Chairman Lee, Ranking Member Wyden, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the management of wild horses and burros on our Nation's public lands. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the public lands for multiple-use and sustained yield, and the Wild Horse and Burro Program is part of that mandate. The program's goal is to ensure both the health of wild horses and burros and the health of the public lands on which they roam.

The BLM manages wild horse and burro herds in 177 Herd Management Areas (HMAs) on approximately 27 million acres of public lands located in 10 western states. The BLM's primary authority for managing these herds is the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (WH&B Act). It directs the BLM to manage the herds as populations of healthy animals in balance with other uses of the public lands, while maintaining the health and productive capacity of the range. This dual statutory mandate – to protect wild horse populations while at the same time to protect the rangelands from deterioration – is a considerable challenge. Under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, BLM's principal authorizing statute, the Bureau manages the public lands for multiple-use and sustained-yield across a variety of uses, including livestock grazing, conservation, mineral development, watershed protection, hunting, fishing, and other forms of public recreation.

Overview

As the first step toward achieving healthy herds, the WH&B Act required the BLM to determine the Appropriate Management Level (AML) – that is, the number of wild horses and burros that can graze on the land in balance with other resources and uses. The BLM takes into account all natural resources and authorized uses of the public lands, consistent with the WH&B Act and with the BLM's mandate under FLPMA. The BLM has determined that the total AML for wild horses and burros on the range west-wide is approximately 26,700 animals. The BLM estimates that as of March 1, 2019, more than 88,000 wild horses and burros are currently on BLM-managed public land. More than 80 percent of all HMAs are currently over AML.

As herd populations exceed AML, forage and water resources become depleted, threatening the overall health of the public rangelands and degrading ecosystems. With insufficient forage and water resources to support herds, the physical health of animals deteriorates, which leads to starvation, dehydration, and eventually death. This also limits forage and water for native wildlife species and permitted livestock grazing. Additional impacts include loss of soil productivity and stability, which increases erosion and alters plant communities from native to invasive species. The severity of these impacts is directly proportional to the degree of overpopulation within an HMA. To prevent herd overpopulation, the WH&B Act directs the BLM to reduce the number of animals on the range to a sustainable level.

The WH&B Act prohibits the BLM from relocating herds to areas where they did not exist prior to the Act's passage in 1971. Since wild horses have virtually no natural predators and herds approximately double in size every four years, the BLM's primary tool to ensure that herd sizes are consistent with the rangeland's capacity to support them has been to gather excess wild horses and burros and remove them from the range.

Wild Horse & Burro Populations

To provide context for the scale of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro program, it is helpful to note the total number of horses and burros that are currently on the public lands as well as the number of animals that have been moved to off-range pastures and corrals. The BLM estimates that of approximately 88,000 animals currently on public rangelands, there are nearly 72,000 horses and over 16,000 burros. These animals exceed AML by over 61,000 animals. While the BLM manages wild horses and burros in 10 states, Nevada currently has more than half of the total population with over 47,000 animals on public lands, which far exceeds the AML of 12,811 for HMAs in the state.

In addition to the animals on-range, as of May 2019, the BLM manages almost 50,000 animals in off-range holding. After gathers occur, wild horses and burros removed from the range enter short-term holding facilities where they are prepped for adoption and sale as well as receive veterinary care prior to being moved to long-term pastures. As of May 2019, about 12,100 animals are being cared for in corrals and over 36,000 animals are being cared for in pastures. The BLM uses 26 corrals to hold and prepare wild horses and burros for adoption and sales, and 38 contracts for pastures for long-term holding.

The BLM also employs fertility control vaccines in female animals and the gelding of male animals, which have been permanently removed from range, for the purpose of suppressing population growth. Male animals are gelded and also segregated from females when removed from the range to prevent growth in off-range populations. Female animals are treated with fertility control treatments on-range, primarily by ground darting. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 the BLM treated over 700 female animals with fertility control treatments, including darting. However, darting methods typically only work in smaller HMAs where animals are more accessible and can be readily approached.

Program Costs

With more than 136,000 wild horses and burros in the BLM's care – both on-range and off-range – the agency is redoubling its efforts to manage program costs. The total lifetime cost of caring for an animal that is removed from the range is substantial, approaching $50,000 per animal. With almost 50,000 horses and burros already held off-range in corrals and pastures, this means that without new opportunities for placing these animals with responsible owners, the BLM will spend more than $1 billion to care for and feed these animals over the remainder of their lives.

BLM Efforts to Achieve Long-Term Solutions

The BLM is taking steps toward longer-term solutions by increasing removals to achieve AML; moving forward with a population growth-suppression strategy; and working to increase placement of horses and burros into good homes through training and incentives.

Removal Strategy
The BLM's focus remains on reducing overpopulation on the range to protect the health of the animals and the land on which they depend. At the same time, the BLM will continue to work with its partners and volunteers on the ground to implement fertility control in herds where it can be effective at slowing population growth. The BLM anticipates removing up to approximately 9,000 wild horses and burros from overpopulated herds on public rangelands in FY 2019 and early FY 2020 as part of our efforts to maintain healthy wild horses and burros on healthy public rangelands. In FY 2018, the BLM gathered and removed over 11,400 animals. As of March 2019, the BLM has removed 2,447 wild horses and burros. The BLM prioritizes gather needs in response to critical wildlife habitats, public health and safety risks, damage to private property, fire rehabilitation, severe limitations of water and forage availability, and/or court orders.

As part of the BLM's removal strategy, we are also working to reduce the cost of caring for the animals that have been removed from the range by increasing the number of horses and burros that are cared for on open pastures, which are more cost effective than corrals. Currently, off-range corrals cost on average more than $5 per day per animal while off-range pastures cost the agency on average about $2 per day per animal. The BLM is proposing to acquire more off-range pastures through contracts with private parties in order to reduce the number of animals in higher-cost corrals. The BLM is currently reviewing bids received from its most recent solicitation for off-range pastures.

Investment in Fertility Control Research
The BLM also is pursuing a comprehensive population growth-suppression strategy. Research is the first step. In 2013, the National Academy of Sciences confirmed that there are no highly effective, easily delivered, and affordable fertility-control methods for wild horses and burros. The BLM is committed to applying the best available fertility-control methods and vaccines to the maximum extent feasible and appropriate, and is open to new public-private partnerships that would expand the use of fertility control as a means to suppress population growth. The BLM currently utilizes "porcine zona pellucida" (PZP) as the primary fertility control vaccine for female animals; however, it is only effective for 12 months and requires a follow up booster shot within the first 15-30 days, which makes field application challenging. Furthermore, most wild horses and burros live in remote, hard-to-access areas that make repeated annual treatments extremely difficult and costly.

To address this issue, the BLM has teamed-up with top universities and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) on a five-year, $11 million research program to develop better management tools, longer lasting fertility-control vaccines, and effective, safe methods for permanent sterilization wild horses. The BLM's research program involves a total of 17 on-going research study projects at five universities – Texas A&M University, University of Wyoming, Purdue University, Colorado State University, and The Ohio State University -- as well as partner projects with Arizona Game and Fish, The Humane Society of the United States, and the USGS. The BLM is committed to moving beyond research and toward implementation of tools that provide productive results by incorporating them into our population control strategy.

In May 2019, the BLM released for public comment a draft environmental assessment to evaluate the safety and feasibility of spaying female wild horses by removal of their ovaries, and on any potential effects the procedure may have on mares and herd behavior after the mares are

returned to the range. The project would take place at the wild horse and burro off-range corral in Burns, Oregon, and the Warm Springs HMA on public rangelands in southeastern Oregon. The project is important as BLM moves forward with developing and deploying better, longer-lasting fertility control tools to slow the rapid increase in wild horse and burro populations on public lands. The BLM has released a Request for Information (RFI) related to spaying female wild horses. Through the RFI, the BLM seeks to gain a better understanding of the capacity of veterinarians to spay female wild horses and burros, and the methods, costs, and approaches the responders would propose to use, among other requested information.

Adoptions

The placement of gathered animals with qualified adopters has been an essential component of the BLM's overall herd population management strategy. Since 1971, more than 245,000 wild horses and burros have been placed into private care through the BLM's Adoption and Sales programs. Up until 2006, adoptions held steady above 5,000 annually; however, after that point, they began to dramatically decline. In 1996 to the early 2000s, for example, the BLM placed nearly 8,700 animals with private adopters; however, by 2006, this number had gone down to 5,100 (and down to 2,100 by 2014). Over the past 10 years, the number of excess animals gathered has far outpaced adoptions and sales.

The BLM is improving programs and partnerships to increase the number of animals placed with qualified adopters. Trained horses are more likely to be adopted than untrained horses when made available to the public. Toward that end, the BLM is working to boost the number of horses in training programs through partnerships with non-governmental organizations, such as the Mustang Heritage Foundation, which helped train and place more than 11,000 animals into private care since 2007. Wild horses and burros are available for adoption on the Internet and at more than 100 events held each year across the United States. The animals are also available at BLM's off-range corral facilities. The Mustang Heritage Foundation's popular "Extreme Mustang Makeovers" highlight the trainability and versatility of mustangs. Also, the Foundation places gentled Mustangs in good homes through the BLM's Trainer Incentive program, which allows for compensation of trainers whose work allows for the animals to be placed into good homes.

The BLM initiated a new program this year called the Adoption Incentive Program that seeks to encourage new individuals and organizations to adopt untrained wild horses and burros by paying a $1,000 incentive. This incentive is to be paid in two installments, the first $500 will be paid within 60 days of adoption of the animal and the second $500 installment will be paid when the animal is titled, approximately one year later. Over 1,000 animals have been adopted and placed into good homes during the first few months of this program.

Conclusion

Addressing the multiple challenges of managing wild horses and burros will require congressional, stakeholder, and agency leadership on a long-term, sustained basis. The BLM is encouraged by recent efforts of interested parties to promote sustainable horse and burro populations on healthy rangelands. The BLM is committed to working with Congress and stakeholders to develop a sustainable Wild Horse and Burro Program. We welcome the subcommittee's interest in the BLM's management of the program and we look forward to working with you to address these challenges.