

CASE 6.1

WILD HORSES



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If all you've ever done is gather up horses, and all you have had to think about is only what you've been told to do, well, that's a pretty simple decision-making process. Some people resist having to think more.

Ron Hall, National Wild Horse
and Burro Program

Background

Wild horses have long been a symbol of the independence of the American West, but today, the health of their population depends heavily on government management. At their peak, in the mid-1800s, an estimated two million wild horses roamed America's rangeland. Populations decreased as development reduced habitat for wild horses and native grazers such as bison, and as horses and burros were rounded up to make room for livestock and farming operations. By the early 1900s, most wild horses had disappeared

from the Great Plains and those that remained were found primarily in the remote mountains, deserts, and badlands of the West. By 1971, only about 9500 wild horses were thought to live on public rangelands.

Public concerns about abuse and wild horse population declines swelled in the 1950s and 1960s. Subsequently, Congress enacted the **Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971** to protect wild horses and burros from abuse and death and to manage them to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on the public lands. The 1971 act declared these wild animals to be "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; that they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people; and that these horses and burros are fast disappearing from the American scene." Since the passage of the act, wild horse and burro populations have increased, but the way they are managed on

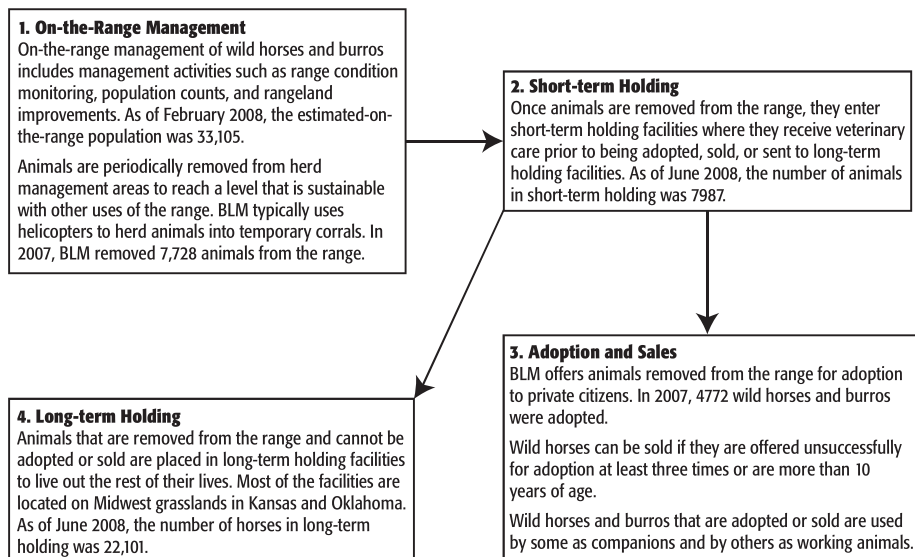
public lands has been controversial and wild horse advocates continue to voice concerns about horses being slaughtered.

The 1971 act authorized and directed the Secretary of the Interior, on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Secretary of Agriculture, on public lands managed by the Forest Service, "to protect and manage wild free-roaming horses and burros as components of public lands." The act also directed the secretaries to manage them "to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance on the public lands." In fiscal year 2007, the program was funded at \$36.4 million. Forty-four BLM field units manage approximately 33,100 wild horses and burros on 199 herd management areas (HMA) covering over 34 million acres in ten western states—Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. BLM's Nevada State Office manages about half of the land and animals in the Wild Horse and Burro Program.

In the mid- to late 1970s, population counts indicated that there was a large increase in wild horses and burros and that they were contributing to overgrazing of the rangeland. Congress amended the 1971 act in 1978 to protect the range from wild horse overpopulation. The Public

Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 directed the secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to determine appropriate management levels (AMLs), maintain a current inventory of wild horses and burros, and determine whether and where overpopulation exists. AML has been defined as the "optimum number of wild horses which results in a natural ecological balance and avoids deterioration of the range." The aggregate AML for all herd management areas is approximately 27,200. Because wild horse populations can double every four years and few natural predators remain, managing wild horse and burro populations at AML has become a primary objective of the program. To reach and maintain AML, BLM primarily conducts "gathers" to remove excess animals from the range. In 2001, BLM began implementing its most recent management strategy, to reach AML by increasing removals. Since then, about 10,600 animals have been removed, on average, per year.

Maintaining current and accurate inventories of wild horses and burros is a key component of on-the-range management. If the census numbers are inaccurate, particularly if they underestimate the actual population, BLM runs the risk that adequate forage or water may not be available for the wild horses and burros or for livestock and wildlife in the area.



After being removed from the range, excess animals are managed in short-term holding facilities, where they are either prepared for adoption or sale, or in long-term holding facilities, where they will live out the remainder of their lives. (See Figure on previous page.) The preferred outcome for healthy animals removed from the range is that they be adopted through BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program. On average, about 6300 wild horses and burros have been adopted annually since 2001. Under the act, as amended, BLM is required to ensure that adopters can provide humane treatment and care. When adoption demand is not sufficient to absorb all the animals removed, the act directs BLM to either destroy the remaining healthy animals in the most humane and cost-efficient manner possible or, under certain circumstances, sell them "without limitation." BLM has not destroyed any animals since January 1982. To manage for the growing number of unadoptable animals, BLM began opening long-term holding facilities. Unlike the rangelands of the West where the animals normally live, the long-term holding facilities use Midwest grasslands that generally provide the animals with abundant forage and decreased stress. This allows most of the animals to live far longer than they would in the wild. BLM pays the private contractors that operate the long-term holding facilities a fee per horse per day. The sales directive, which was enacted on December 8, 2004, directs BLM to sell excess wild horses and burros without limitation if the animal is more than 10 years of age or has been offered unsuccessfully for adoption at least three times.

Toward Long-Term Sustainability

The number of wild horses and burros removed from the range is far greater than the number adopted or sold, which has resulted in a significant increase in the number of animals in short- and long-term holding and commensurate increases in spending for their care. Since 2001, over 74,000 animals have been removed from the range, while only about 46,400 have been adopted or sold. Thirty-six percent fewer wild horses and burros were adopted in 2007 compared with average adoption rates in the 1990s. BLM

officials attribute the steady adoption decline in recent years to the decreasing demand for horses in general and increasing hay and fuel costs associated with their care. As of June 2008, BLM was holding 30,088 animals in short- and long-term holding facilities, far more than in 2001 when it held 9807. From 2001 through June 2008, the average cost per animal increased from \$3.00 per day to \$5.08 per day. Spending on long-term holding has increased from about \$668,000 in 2000 to more than \$9.1 million in 2007. In addition, with the long-term holding facilities at full capacity more wild horses are spending a longer time in the more expensive short-term holding facilities.

The long-term sustainability of BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program depends on the resolution of two significant challenges:

- *If not controlled, off-the-range holding costs will continue to overwhelm the program.* In 2008, BLM anticipates that holding costs will account for about 74 percent of the program's direct costs. As holding costs continue to increase, less funding is available for on-the-range management, which could result in sharp increases in the animal population in the wild. To deal with its long-term holding problem, BLM has primarily sought increased funding to open additional holding facilities. However, funding is not likely to increase in the future, and limited funding is forcing BLM to make the difficult choice among managing the animals on the range to prevent overpopulation, destroying excess unadoptable animals, or selling them without limitation.
- *BLM's options are limited for dealing with unadoptable animals.* The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, as amended, requires that excess animals, for which the adoption demand is not sufficient to absorb all the animals removed from the range, be destroyed in the most humane and cost-efficient manner possible or, under certain circumstances, be sold without limitation. Never less, BLM has still chosen not to destroy or sell excess animals without limitation because of concerns about public and congressional reaction to the large-scale slaughter of thousands of healthy horses.

However, by not destroying or selling them without limitation, BLM is not in compliance with the requirements of the act.

The Horse Lobby View

Defenders of wild mustangs have long portrayed them as the *victims* of ranchers, who prefer cattle on the range, and middlemen, who want to make profit by selling them for horsemeat. Many of these defenders claim that horses have a right to be there. The more extreme groups say, "Let nature take its course. Just leave the horses alone and let them populate naturally."

For groups formed to protect the horses, the specter of euthanasia as a solution remains anathema. "It's not acceptable to the American public," said Virginia Parant, a lawyer who is the director of the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign. "The mustang," she says, "is part of the American myth. People want to know that they can come to the American West and know that they can see herds of wild horses running. It's part of the imagery." She laughs at the idea of attributing range destruction to horses when cattle greatly outnumber them. Further, Jay F. Kirkpatrick, a scientist who is the director of the Science and Conservation Center in Billings, Montana, contends that BLM has not given sufficient weight to birth control options which could make "serious inroads" on the horse populations.

The Ecological View

Increasingly, environmentalists and scientists have come to see mustangs not as victims but as thousand-pound aliens because they are not native to the region like bison but rather descendants of horses brought to North America by the Spanish. Over time, stray domestic horses belonging to settlers and Native Americans bred with the Spanish mustangs. With hooves and teeth evolved for a different kind of environment, wild horses are especially destructive to the habitats of endangered desert turtles and desert birds in the south and big horn sheep in the north. They damage the waterholes. They damage the grasses, the shrubs, and the bushes, causing negative consequences for all the other plants and animals that live there.

The attitudes of environmentalists toward the horses have changed so much that some are willing to say what was heresy a few years ago: that euthanasia is acceptable if the alternatives are boarding the mustangs for life at taxpayers' expense or leaving them to overpopulate, damage the range and die of hunger or thirst. As one wild horse specialist tells Paula Morin:

If the wild horse groups can't or won't take them, then I think the proper answer is to implement the law. Personally, I think sale authority would be a good alternative to humane destruction because it would allow us to sell the horses as a last resort. Yes, it would allow those people who buy them to do whatever they want with them, but at least something purposeful happens with the animal. I don't think anybody enjoys the thought of wild horses being euthanized, but it's a fact of life. Hundreds of thousands of domestic horses are put down every year for one reason or another, and so are dogs and cats. Yes, people love horses, and wild horses are special. But they are an animal that must be managed, and if we don't manage them they have problems.

Another sensitive issue besides euthanasia concerns selling wild horses for meat, despite the fact that about 90,000 domestic horses are sold for meat each year. "It is difficult to understand," Ted Williams writes in *Audubon Magazine*,

why Americans believe that starvation is more humane than culling. In Australia, where there are thought to be as many as 265,000 feral horses and 5 million feral burros, the government shoots them. There, shooting is considered more humane than capture and removal because the animals are not subject to the stresses of the round up, yarding, and long-distance transportation. Moreover, most other nations don't share our taboo against eating horsemeat. It's considered a delicacy in Europe, and in Australia the commercial slaughter of feral horses, burros, and other livestock is a \$100 million a year industry.

Could birth control provide an alternative? Herd sizes double every four years, and the BLM is working with a contraceptive that is largely effective for two years in mares. Alan Shepard, who helps run the contraceptive program, says that it showed promise but had limitations. "The ultimate thing is you can't catch them all." Australia also is working on chemical contraception, but an effective agent, practical for field application, may be decades away.

How about the horse lobby's charge that cows do more damage than wild horses? Environmentalists concede that cows do more damage because there are lots more of them, but cattle provide food and livelihoods. When it comes to habitat destruction, what horses lack in numbers they make up for in efficiency. When the grass between the shrubs is gone, a cow is out of luck, but a horse or burro will stomp the plant to death to get that one last blade underneath it. When cows run out of forage, cowboys move them or take them home, but horses and burros are out there all year. Unfenced, they can go anywhere. This means that if horses are left unchecked, they would be the last to survive in the ecosystem, simply because they're more efficient about how much they can eat. But if you let these herds populate "naturally," eventually they would overstock the range and denude it completely—that means it would never grow back.

In the final analysis, a growing number of environmentalists think the horse lobby does not

appreciate the importance of maintaining the *whole* ecology and does the horses a disservice when it sets them apart.

Case Questions

1. Which decision-making techniques and concepts described in this chapter are most appropriate to the BLM's situation? Show how you would apply them.
2. What suggestions would you make to help the Bureau improve its handling of the wild horse problem?
3. How would you model this problem?

Case References

U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Bureau of Land Management: Effective Long-Term Options Needed to Manage Unadoptable Wild Horses*, GAO-09-77 (October 2008), 1–10; Deanne Stillman, *Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009); Jim Robbins, "As Wild Horses Multiply, a Voice for Contraception," *The New York Times* (April 21, 2005/2009); Felicity Barringer, "Mustangs Stir a Debate on Thinning the Herd," *The New York Times* (July 20, 2008); Paula Morin, *Honest Horses: Wild Horses in the Great Basin* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006); Ted Williams, "Horse Sense," *Audubon Magazine* (September–October 2006).