

BLM Sellout an American Icon with irresponsible spending and selling horses to slaughter.

Program to save horses dooms them

By Martha Mendoza, Associated Press writer

RENO, Nev. -- A multimillion-dollar federal program created to save the lives of wild horses is instead channeling them by the thousands to slaughterhouses where they are chopped into cuts of meat.

Among those profiting from the slaughter are employees of the Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency that administers the program.

These are the conclusions of an Associated Press investigation of the U.S. Wild Horse and Burro Program, which has rounded up 165,000 animals and spent \$250 million since it was created by Congress 25 years ago.

The program was intended to protect and manage wild horses on public lands, where they compete for resources with grazing cattle. The idea: Gather up excess horses and offer them to the public for adoption.

However, nothing in the law prevents the new owners from selling the horses to slaughterhouses once they take title to them. It is common for horses to go to slaughter when they grow old or fall lame, but nearly all former BLM horses sent to slaughterhouses are young and healthy, according to slaughterhouse operators.

Under the program's rules, anyone can adopt up to four horses per year, paying \$125 for each healthy, government-vaccinated animal. If the adopters properly care for the horses for one year, they get legal title to them in the form of handsome BLM certificates bearing individual identification numbers that are freeze-branded into each horse's hide.

"We're working toward helping people develop pride in their horses," said Deb Harrington, a BLM spokeswoman in Oklahoma. "These titles are suitable for framing."

Using freeze-brand numbers and computerized public records, the AP traced more than 57 BLM horses that have been sold to U.S. and Canadian slaughterhouses since September. Eighty percent of those horses were less than 10 years old and 25 percent were less than 5 years old. Ten years is not considered old for horses, which are often ridden well into their 20s.

At the Cavel West slaughterhouse in Redmond, Ore., for example, proprietor Pascal Derde pulled a sheaf of BLM certificates from a folder and explained that they were for horses he recently processed at his plant and sent to Belgium for human consumption.

Nearby, the carcass of a BLM horse dangled on a hook while butchers sliced the lean meat into packageable cuts.

"Killed on Friday, processed Monday, Thursday we load the truck and then it's flown to Europe," said Mr. Derde. "Monday it's sold in Belgium, Tuesday eaten, Wednesday it's back in the soil."

"The sad thing," said Pete Steele, a former BLM employee living in Montecello, Utah, "is you've got a bunch of wild horses rounded up and nobody wants them except for some folks who see there's some money to be made here."

Asked about the AP's findings, Tom Pogacnik, director of the BLM's \$16 million-a-year Wild Horse and Burro Program, conceded that about 90 percent of the horses rounded up -- thousands of horses each year -- go to slaughter.

Has a program intended to save wild horses as a symbol of the American frontier evolved into a supply system for horse meat?

"I guess that's one way of looking at it," Mr. Pogacnik said. "Recognizing that we can't leave them out

there, well, at some point the critters do have to come off the range."

Clifford Hansen, a former U.S. senator from Wyoming who introduced the bill to create the program, now wishes he could remove his name from the legislation.

"The law was intended to recognize the significance of wild horses and burros, but talk about a waste of public funds," said Mr. Hansen, now 84. "It's become the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of."

The government spends an average of \$1,100 to round up, vaccinate, freeze brand and adopt out a horse. Adopters pay \$125 for each healthy horse, and can get lame or old horses for as little as \$25, or even for free. After holding the horses for a year, the adopters are free to sell them for slaughter, typically receiving \$700 per animal.

The government spends \$1,100. The adopter can make \$575 or more.

The sellers find no shortage of horse meat buyers. The demand for American horse meat has long been strong in Asia and Europe, where few share the common American compunction about eating the animal.

Today, demand is up in Europe because of fears of mad cow disease, said Luc Van Damme of Zele, Belgium, whose 100-year-old Velda horse meat business owns the Cavel West slaughterhouse.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 42 million pounds of horse meat were exported in 1995 at an average price of 62 cents per pound. In 1996 prices were up to 80 cents a pound and rising. France and Belgium were the biggest buyers, with others including Japan, Switzerland, Italy, Netherlands, Mexico, Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, Austria, Russia, Bahrain, Argentina and China.

While nothing in the law prevents sending an adopted horse to slaughter, government officials offer conflicting opinions on whether it is legal or ethical for BLM officials to adopt and sell horses.

The Associated Press matched computer records of horse adoptions with a computerized list of federal employees and found that more than 200 current BLM employees have adopted more than 600 wild horses and burros.

Some of these employees, when contacted by the AP, could not account for the whereabouts of their animals. Others acknowledged some of their horses were sent to slaughterhouses.

In Rock Springs, Wyo., the BLM corrals are run by Victor McDarment, whose crew rounds up horses from open ranges in Wyoming, freeze brands them and arranges adoptions. It's a job that gives them access to thousands of horses.

According to BLM database records, Mr. McDarment adopted 16 horses. His estranged wife adopted nine. His children adopted at least six. His girlfriend adopted four. His ex-wife adopted one. His co-workers in the corrals and their families adopted an additional 54.

Most of the horses they adopted were discounted from the normal \$125 fee. Some were free. Discounting is allowed if a horse is injured, old, or otherwise unlikely to get adopted. Because he's in charge, Mr. McDarment decides if a horse should be discounted.

A discounted paint won a first prize for the McDarments at a national show last year. Mr. McDarment said the horse had been discounted because it had a leg injury.

On a sub-zero day, as steam rose from troughs where the wild horses drink, Mr. McDarment sat in a snow-covered BLM office with his managers and said he could not account for all the horses he adopted.

"I don't keep track," he said.

Mr. McDarment's estranged wife Carol McDarment, a hotel maid, said she never saw most of the horses adopted in her name.

"I just signed the forms and Vic drove them out," she said.

Some ended up with Dennis Gifford, a Lovell, Wyo., rancher and rodeo contractor who was barred from BLM horse adoptions because he was rounding up wild mustangs illegally and adding them to his private herds. According to court records, he has also been convicted of selling livestock without state brand inspections.

He said he has tried to breed Mr. McDarment's horses for bucking stock, and said he's sure some of

Mr. McDarment's horses were slaughtered.

"They got to end up somewhere," Mr. Gifford said.

Some of Mr. McDarment's co-workers know where all their animals are. Jim Williams, for example, has leased land and is breeding burros from Arizona that he and his friends adopted. He sold additional horses at an auction to be used for roping cattle. He's hoping to make several thousand dollars a year off the foals.

"Of course, I want to make money off this," said Mr. Williams, stomping mud off his boots in a frozen corral.

"Is there anything wrong with that? It's legal, ain't it?" he said.

According to federal law, U.S. government employees are not allowed to use public office for private gain. The U.S. Office of Government Ethics said this means BLM workers may not participate in bureau programs that affect their financial interests.

But Gabriel Paone, the Department of the Interior's designated ethics official in Washington, D.C., said there is nothing wrong with BLM employees adopting wild horses, keeping them until they get the title, and then selling them for profit.

In fact, an internal BLM memo issued in November 1995 "encourages employees to adopt and train wild horses and burros for their personal use."

"They're not doing this as public officials," Mr. Paone said. "They're doing this as private citizens."

"There's a real gray area in the way the law was written as to whether they're breaking the law or not," said Ms. Harrington, the BLM spokeswoman in Oklahoma.

So the adoptions by BLM employees continue.

Michael Woods, a BLM range management specialist in Baker City, Ore., and his wife have adopted four horses since 1992 and sold them all.

One of his horses, a black mare with a star on her face, was rounded up as a foal from the high plains of Eastern Oregon in 1992. According to freeze brand numbers obtained by the AP from the Bouvry Exports Calgary Ltd. slaughterhouse in Fort Macleod, Alberta, Canada, the horse was killed in 1996.

Mr. Woods said the mare hurt her leg last year and wasn't working out as a riding horse, so he sold her. "I assure you I didn't intend to sell her for slaughter," he said, "but the only one that was interested in her at the time was a buyer that takes horses to slaughter."

Mr. Woods would not say how much he was paid for the horse, which originally cost him the \$125 adoption fee.

The federal government is conducting several reviews of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, with two audits and two reports to Congress expected to be completed in 1997.

"I welcome the scrutiny," said Mr. Pogacnik, who runs the program out of a converted warehouse in Reno, Nev. "It can only help."

Mr. Pogacnik said he hopes the reports and audits will help him figure out what to do with the 15,600 wild horses and burros the bureau has identified as excess that are now roaming 10 Western states.

That's on top of more than 1,100 old geldings in an Oklahoma sanctuary that was slated to close years ago, and several thousand more horses awaiting adoption in placement centers across the country.

The BLM has failed to submit legally required biennial reports about the Wild Horse and Burro Program to Congress since 1992. An advisory council on wild horses and burros, required by law, has not convened since President Clinton first took office. BLM officials said it is because they are short of staff.

"We're here because we care about the critters," said Mr. Pogacnik. "They're a wonderful part of America, and we're here to protect them. Of course, we've got a ways to go."

Associated Press news data editor Drew Sullivan and investigative researcher Randy Herschaft contributed to this report.