

Wild horse summit held to determine mustangs fate

Published on Thursday, November 13, 2008 8:49 AM PST

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The pounding of hooves and clouds of swirling dust that accompanies a band of wild horses as they race effortlessly across an endless plain; a new-born foal, for the first time unfolding his long legs and awkwardly clambering onto all fours; a peacefully grazing herd of fuzzy mares, fat with new life; the awesome power of scarred and muscled rival stallions rising to their hind legs to battle: these sights of America's wild horses could be soon just a memory. Our American mustangs (and the wild burros, too) are being held for ransom. Government officials, armed with a new law, are threatening to kill as many as two thirds of all the remaining wild born mustangs if they do not get more money. There is a real possibility that they might succeed in this heartless scheme, if we, the American people, allow them.

America's debt to its wild horses and burros is incalculable. They have carried our burdens and died in our wars; brought our pioneer families across the vast plains, plowed our fields and carried our first mail. The horse evolved here in North America; it was re-introduced by the Spanish Conquistadors, and those magnificent horses are the progenitors of today's wild herds. They are a living link to our past, truly, living legends. Today mustangs carry the US Marines Honor Guard in the Rose Parade, they carry our Border Patrol Agents into terrain too difficult for jeeps, they are used by police departments and for equine assisted therapy for people with post-traumatic stress disorder, and learning and physical disabilities. There are mustang champion endurance and trail horses; and countless loyal family companions.

Wild Horse Summit Convenes in Wake of Slaughter Proposal

When the Bureau of Land Management, responsible for the care of America's mustangs and burros, announced in July that it was considering euthanizing 33,500 wild horses due to a budget shortfall, horse advocates and fans went on red alert. In response, an emergency Summit was held in Las Vegas. The 100-plus people attending included legends in the horse advocacy and rescue; leading equine and range scientists, famous authors, filmmakers, photographers, lawyers, Native Americans, concerned citizens, and mustang adopters; on the other side of the ideological fence, representing the Government, the Director and two Deputies from the BLM.

"What wild horses share with us can't be bought or sold. It's priceless. The striking family values they possess.... We can learn much from them. In the herd, the children are valued above all and violence is banished ... yet we continue to destroy their lives, to strip away their protection.... Murder, anyone? They have done nothing



Carol Walker/Living Images Mustang round-ups continued in Colorado last week. Despite too few of horses left on the range, the round-ups continue. "It was horrible to watch - just horrible," said Carol Walker after watching the event take place



to us.” – Michael Blake, Author, “Dances With Wolves”

At the Summit, we learned in detail that what we had suspected and feared was true. For years, horse advocates have accused the BLM of mismanagement of the wild horses and burros. Chief among the claims of what some are calling “a policy of extinction” by the BLM is an aggressive round-up campaign, a brutal process that has killed and lamed horses and foals and at the very least, rips apart family groups. The rounded-up horses are supposedly destined for adoption. But over the last nine years, thousands more were taken than the adoption market could support. Since 1999, a shocking 70,000 horses and burros have been removed, so now there are twice as many animals standing around in government pastures, being fed with tax dollars, than there are left free on their legal ranges. These 33,500 pointlessly removed horses are the ones that now the BLM says it cannot afford to maintain.

The Round Ups

Wild horses and burros are rounded up by government contractors who use helicopters to drive the horses, sometimes over long distances, over rough terrain. Sometimes horses, notably foals, are injured, even breaking legs during the chase.

Chutes are set up leading into pens. As the horses approach, a “Judas” horse, that has been taught to run through the chutes, is released, and the herd follows him into the pens. There, chaos ensues as the horses realize they’re trapped. As flight animals, they are highly sensitive to fear, and the fear is contagious. The panicked horses often injure themselves attempting to climb the rails or are trampled. Carol Walker, photographer and author of “Wild Hoofbeats” has spent years observing and photographing wild herds in Colorado. Walker observed a round-up last week of Colorado’s Sandwash herd. As the contractors were forcing the horses through a chute into a trailer, a gray mare was badly trampled. “It was horrible to watch – just horrible,” Walker said.

Once the desired number of horses is penned, the gate is shut and the others are turned back on the range. This “gate cut” separates the band. Horses live in family bands with highly evolved social structure. They are the opposite of solitary animals; their herd and their position in the family is all-important. “Every time we disrupt the bands, these social structures are being destroyed... we can’t continue to bring them in and separate them... The wisdom of the harem stallion is so important to the health of that band,” said Karen Sussman, Summit organizer. The fragmented bands left behind can become dysfunctional, she explained. Dysfunction in the herds can cause birth rates to rise in compensation for the lost band members among other behaviors.

A Numbers Game

Another recurrent criticism at the Summit had to do with the BLM’s “numbers”. The lament that there are too many horses, and we must remove some, is reasonable -unless they are not telling the truth about how many horses there are, how many the range can support, and how many new horses will be added with each crop of foals.

At the Summit, we heard evidence that the bureau has lied to the public about all of these numbers. “I believe these figures are being intentionally hidden from the public precisely because they would reveal such an enormous subversion of the Wild Horse and Burro Act,” said scientist Craig Downer. The BLM reports there are currently 33,000 horses and burros on the ranges. At the summit it became clear that the number is much lower, some say there are 20,000, but some say there may be as few as 13,500 horses left. The governments herd counts are not actual; there are no helicopter pilots or range scientists

out there counting every horse; instead, the counts are based on statistical models.

The BLM's Appropriate Management Levels, the amount of rangeland needed to support a wild herd, are said by critics to be "arbitrary". But it is these AML's that the Bureau ruthlessly pursues, to the point of eliminating whole, "healthy herds from healthy rangeland", said Jerry Reynoldson, another Summit organizer. Many speakers expressed concerns that the BLM is systematically reducing the herds below genetic viability. In some places, the herds have been decimated to as few as only 12 horses left after round-ups as in Nevada's Little Humboldt; and Hot Creek Herd Area had its 128 horses culled to only 3. Equine biologists say that a healthy, sustainable herd needs to be at least 100, and even better, 1,000 animals. "BLM's ... techniques appear to be less than honest and aimed at permanently crippling or eliminating the majority of free-roaming herds," said the dynamic Nevada resident Cindy MacDonald who has spent three years compiling a report on the issue. She called for a full Congressional investigation into the BLM's management practices.

Vanishing Lands

When the American public and schoolchildren wrote bags of letters to Congress to support protecting horses and burros and their ranges, Congress voted unanimously, and passed the Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971. The Act created permanent homes for the wild ones called the Herd Areas, encompassing some 53 million acres. Over the years the BLM has whittled away at these federally granted range lands – today there are a little more than 34 million acres, a loss of wild horse habitat of over 19 million acres.

"To me it seems the height of ingratitude that of all the species upon which humans inflict their prejudice and spite, it should be these two, the horse and burro, who have performed such a world of service for mankind over, not just centuries, but approximately seven millennia! Yet their truer place among unfolding life on Earth was, and remains, in the wild, and particularly here in North American where the vast majority of their evolutionary past history was experienced over many millions of years, and with practically no break, right up to the present." – Craig Downer

These stolen herd areas have been leased to ranchers, whose cattle outnumber horses on public lands by 400 to 1, and to mining and oil companies, who are now riding the wave of public opinion against dependency on foreign oil. "Only one half of one percent of BLM land is left for the wild horse," said Sussman.

"This is a much bigger story than just horses; it's about the public lands and who they really belong to." Jerry Reynoldson, Wild Horse Summit Organizer

She and others said that many believe cattle, not wild horses have a "right" to be on our public lands, but less than 3% of America's beef comes from public range grazed cattle. Many of the 4 million cattle who graze our public lands do not belong to family ranchers who will go broke if forced to share with wild horses and burros; those cattle belong to corporations that receive our tax dollars to make up the difference in the low grazing permit fees: currently, it costs these corporations only \$1.35 per cow per month. Who are these "Rolex Cowboys"? According to the Animal Welfare Institute, among them are Paris Hilton (the Hilton Family Trust), a Dutch beer company (Anheuser-Busch) and other Forbes 400 trillionaires like John Simplot.

Downer said BLM has "reduced its equid-occupied areas by 7,658,302, or 18%, while the USFS has reduced its equid-occupied areas by 5,986,112 acres, a whopping 53%."

The fences within the legal Herd Areas that are erected at taxpayer expense for the convenience of these corporate ranchers often interfere with the horses and burros migration to water and forage.

“I really think the wild horses are doomed if we continue to let the BLM manage them. At the current rate of removal - we won't have any horses left on public land in 10 years,” - Jill Starr, Twin Oaks resident and head of Lifesavers Wild Horse rescue.

A persistent argument against the horses on public lands is that the horses destroy the range, depriving the cattle and wildlife species. Downer blasted that as a myth. “Wild horses and burros on public land remain on the very bottom of the totem pole of priorities,” he said. He detailed how horses actually reseed the range grasses through passing seeds with their manure. Horses traverse widely during grazing and don't congregate and destroy waterholes and other riparian areas as the cattle do.

Downer stated that California reveals that not only livestock but also big game are being given entire preference both within the original Herd Areas and even more flagrantly within the greatly reduced Herd Management Areas. While forage and water rarely seem to be an issue for the established livestock and big game interests, these same resources are almost always portrayed as being too little for the relatively tiny members of our nation's remaining wild horses and burros, he said. “Given sufficient freedom in space and time, (the wild horses and burros) prove that the equid element restores and enhances the ecosystem here in North America, as elsewhere. But they must be allowed to fill their natural niche in a natural habitat of sufficient size to become a long-term viable, stabilized population,” Downer summarized.

“Wild horses and burros have become the scapegoats for virtually all range deterioration, despite the fact that independent as well as the BLM's own data show that the majority of rangeland deterioration is caused by livestock,” states the AWI.

Even the adoption program, which up until 1999 was keeping up with horse gathers, came under question at the Summit. The BLM has been sabotaging the adoptions, MacDonald claims. The low adoption fee, lack of adequate screening for would be adopters and lack of follow-up on adopted animals all create a situation rife with lost mustangs and burros, ones abused, starved and sent across the borders to slaughter. The low adoption fees encourage first time horse owners who do not have the expertise to gentle and train the animals. As a result many end up at rescue facilities. The Adoption Task Group formed at the Summit brainstormed recommendations to improve the adoption program. Other Task Groups formed including Media Relations, Education, and a Legal Team.

The Wild Horse Summit brought together a highly energized group that not only discussed the problems but also brainstormed solutions. Among the Summit speakers were Chief Arvol Looking Horse; Dances with Wolves author Michael Blake; Madeline Pickens, wife of T. Boone Pickens; filmmaker James Kleinert; Deanne Stillman, author of Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West; Ginger Kathryns, famous for her documentaries on the wild stallion Cloud; Le Alan Pinkerton (Pinky), U.S. Border Patrol, who exclusively uses mustangs on a 303-mile stretch of the US/Canada border, and California wild horse rescue visionaries Twin Oaks resident Jill Starr of Lifesavers Wild Horse Rescue, Neda DeMayo of Return to Freedom.

The organizers were Karen Sussman, president of the International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros, the oldest wild horse and burro organization in the United States. She follows in the footsteps of Wild Horse Annie; and has devoted her life to saving America's wild horses and burros.

Jerry Reynoldson, whose presence was missed, ironically had a riding accident that prevented his coming. Reynoldson founded Best Friends and is a longtime advocate for the wild ones. Marissa Morin was the third co-host and gave an inspiring presentation on the healing powers of horses. Facilitators were Mary Ann Simonds, and John Stahl-Wert. The Summit's organizers are working on compiling the information and people from the Summit into a Wild Horse Coalition that will take the message to the public and to Congress. "We need a moratorium on gathers and the horses returned," summarized Sussman.

BLM's Final Solution

As to the 33,500 horses that the government is considering euthanizing, BLM Director, Henri Bisson said at the Summit, "Contrary to reports in the media I never said euthanasia was a plan, only a legal option." Bisson said he would be retiring early next year, which caused the comment I overheard: "He won't be around to catch the heat," (If the horses are euthanized.)

"I talked to the BLM head," said radio host George Knapp on the show Coast-to-Coast Sunday night following the Summit. "He said they are talking about whether to use poison, bullets or captive bolt gun. It's gone beyond talking points when they begin to talk about method."

The clock is ticking; the BLM's sharpshooters are loading their rifles. Thirty-three thousand, five hundred perfectly healthy horses await their fate. Will they be released back onto their ranges, to be reunited with their families, to run free and live out their lives? Or will they be shot dead, by a bullet to the head, their blood staining our land and our conscience? Only a loud and sustained public outcry will stop the slaughter. The world will watch what we do with our horses; the horses that carried us across the wide country, that fought our wars, ploughed our fields, and carried our mail and our burdens.

To protest the slaughter plan, and demand the BLM to re-release the 33,500 horses onto their ranges, as well as ask for a full Congressional investigation into the BLM's management of the wild horses and burros, write, call, or E-mail your representative, Senator, and the BLM administration.

If this story has moved you, please take action. Let your friends know what's happening. Write a couple letters. The horses are counting on us.

The Summit and Coalition website is www.wildhorsesummit.com.

C. MacDonald's research can be found at www.americanherds.blogspot.com.

For sample petitions, letters, and addresses of Kern County and California legislators' e-mail the author at mountainmustangs@gmail.com

For more Wild Horse news, check out the new site: www.cantertales.com

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