

## **Bureau of Land Management: Effective Long-Term Options Needed to Manage Unadoptable Wild Horses**

GAO-09-77 October 9, 2008

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### **Summary**

The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages about 33,100 wild horses and burros on 199 Herd Management Areas (HMA) in 10 western states. Under the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, as amended, BLM is to protect wild horses and burros, set appropriate management levels (AML), maintain current inventory counts, and remove excess animals to prevent overpopulation and rangeland damage. Over the years, various stakeholders have raised issues about BLM's management of the animals on and off the range. GAO examined (1) BLM's progress in setting and meeting AML; (2) BLM's management of animals off the range through adoptions, sales, and holding facilities; (3) BLM's controls to help ensure the humane treatment of animals; and (4) what challenges, if any, BLM faces in managing for the long-term sustainability of the program. GAO surveyed and analyzed documents from 26 of the 44 BLM offices that manage wild horses and burros.

BLM has made significant progress toward setting and meeting AML (the optimum number of animals which results in a thriving natural ecological balance and avoids range deterioration). BLM has set AML for 197 out of 199 HMAs. Most of the field offices GAO surveyed considered similar factors in determining AML, such as rangeland conditions; however, BLM has not provided specific formal guidance to the field offices on how to set AML. Without clear guidance, BLM cannot ensure that the factors considered in future AML revisions will be consistent across HMAs. At a national level, in 2007, BLM was closer to meeting AML (about 27,200 animals) than in any other year since AMLs were first reported in 1984. The extent to which BLM has actually met AML depends on the accuracy of BLM's population counts. Nineteen of the 26 field officials GAO surveyed used a counting method which, researchers say, consistently undercounts animals and does not provide a statistical range of population estimates. Undercounting can put animals at risk and lead to increased program costs. The number of animals removed from the range is far greater than the number adopted or sold, which has resulted in the need for increased short-term and long-term holding. 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 animals were adopted in 2007 than compared to the average adoption rates in the 1990s. As of June 2008, BLM was holding 30,088 animals in holding facilities, up from 9,807 in 2001. To accommodate the increased removals and declining adoptions and sales, BLM has increased the number of short-term and long-term holding facilities. BLM has implemented multiple controls to help ensure humane treatment, including random checks on adopted horses and agreements with adopters and buyers to prevent slaughter. Although BLM state offices collect data on the treatment of the animals, BLM does not always compile the information in its central database or report it to the public. Providing additional information to the public on the treatment of these animals could help inform the public about their treatment and improve transparency. The long-term sustainability of BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program depends on the resolution of two significant challenges: (1) If not controlled, off-the-range holding costs will continue to overwhelm the program. The percentage of the program's direct costs for holding animals off the range increased from \$7 million in 2000 (46 percent) to \$21 million in 2007 (67 percent). In 2008, these costs could account for 74 percent of the program's budget. (2) BLM has limited options for dealing with unadoptable animals. The act provides that unadopted excess animals shall be humanely destroyed or, under certain circumstances, sold without limitation. However, BLM only manages these animals through sales with limitations. BLM is concerned about the possible reaction to the destruction of healthy animals.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations from this work are listed below with a Contact for more information. Status will change from "In process" to "Implemented" or "Not implemented" based on our follow up work.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

**Recommendation:** To improve the management of BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, the Secretary of the Interior should direct BLM to finalize and issue the new Wild Horse and Burro Program Handbook that establishes a policy for setting AML to ensure that AML is determined based on consistent factors across HMAs into the future.

**Agency Affected:** Department of the Interior

**Status:** In process

**Comments:** When we confirm what actions the agency has taken in response to this recommendation, we will provide updated information.

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**Recommendation:** To improve the management of BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, the Secretary of the Interior should direct BLM to continue to adopt and employ statistically based methods to estimate animal populations across HMAs, such as those being evaluated by animal population researchers, to improve the accuracy of population estimates integral to BLM's management of wild horses and burros on the range and in planning for capacity needed for excess animals once they are removed from the range.

**Agency Affected:** Department of the Interior

**Status:** In process

**Comments:** When we confirm what actions the agency has taken in response to this recommendation, we will provide updated information.

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**Recommendation:** To improve the management of BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, the Secretary of the Interior should direct BLM to continue to track the number of animals harmed or killed during the gather process in a centralized database system and determine what information on the treatment of gathered animals, short-term and long-term holding animals, and adopted animals could easily be provided to the public to help inform them about the treatment of wild horses and burros.

**Agency Affected:** Department of the Interior

**Status:** In process

**Comments:** When we confirm what actions the agency has taken in response to this recommendation, we will provide updated information.

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**Recommendation:** To improve the management of BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program, the Secretary of the Interior should direct BLM to develop cost-effective alternatives to the process of caring for wild horses removed from the range in long-term holding facilities and seek the legislative changes that may be necessary to implement those alternatives.

**Agency Affected:** Department of the Interior

**Status:** In process

**Comments:** When we confirm what actions the agency has taken in response to this recommendation, we will provide updated information.

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**Recommendation:** To address BLM's noncompliance with the act, as amended, the Secretary of the Interior should direct BLM to discuss with Congress and other stakeholders how best to comply with the act or amend it so that BLM would be able to comply. As part of this discussion, BLM should inform Congress of its concerns with (1) the act's requirement for the humane destruction of excess animals and (2) the possible slaughter of healthy horses if excess animals are sold without limitation, under certain circumstances, as the act requires.

**Agency Affected:** Department of the Interior

**Status:** In process

**Comments:** When we confirm what actions the agency has taken in response to this recommendation, we will provide updated information.