

PONY PALS: WILD HORSES OF THE WILD WEST

QUICK STATS

- ✘ **CONFERENCE:** Spending
- ✘ **TEAM:** Bureau of Land Management
- **FUMBLE:** \$67.9 million for wild horse management
- **HOW TO RECOVER THE BALL:** Transfer the management and care of the wild horse and burro populations to private entities



Photo: Facebook – BLM Wild Horse & Burro Program

The image of majestic wild horses—manes flowing against the backdrop of a blazing sunset—may be a romantic reminder of the Old American West. But the truth is that these creatures are feral descendants of animals that escaped from or were turned loose over the centuries by Spanish explorers, settlers, miners, Native American Tribes, and the U.S. cavalry. Because wild horses and burros (WHBs) have virtually no natural enemies, they have adapted and thrived. For decades the population of these majestic creatures was kept in check by rounding them up to sell for slaughter—until 1950 when Velma Bronn Johnston, a.k.a. “Wild Horse Annie,” began a crusade to end what she saw as the inhumane removal of WHBs. The persistence of Mrs. Johnston and other horse lovers led to the Hunting Wild Horses and Burros on Public Lands Act of 1959 and the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971,⁹³ which gave

these wild animals protected status and mandated BLM and the Forest Service to manage, protect, and control WHBs on public lands.⁹⁴

To comply with the law, BLM must conduct an annual census of WHBs roaming the 179 Herd Management Areas in the West—a vast area of 26.9 million acres. BLM must also determine the number of animals the managed areas can reasonably sustain. In March 2015 for example, an estimated 58,150 WHBs roamed ranges able to tolerate just 26,715. Every year the population of animals exceeds what the land can handle, and some of the surplus WHBs are rounded up and removed to off-range pastures and corrals, such as the holding facility in Pauls Valley, OK. Once in these facilities, the animals are available for sale or adoption, but the number of willing adopters of wild horses falls short of the number of horses in excess. Animals that are passed up for adoption three times are transferred to long-term, off-range contract facilities, 20 of which are in Oklahoma.

However, this is only a stopgap measure, as WHBs are prolific reproducers whose numbers double about every four years in captivity. BLM has tried various forms of birth control in an attempt to thin the herds, but no effective, easily-administered remedy has yet been developed. As a result, the off-range population alone has continued to climb to an October

2015 count of 47,204 animals to care for and feed for the rest of their lives.⁹⁵

But should the federal government be in the business of managing WHBs anyway? There are numerous privately funded organizations already dedicated to looking out for their interests. Surely these groups could oversee and protect WHBs more efficiently than BLM, which recently released a report showing that, contrary to BLM policy, a private buyer managed to purchase 1,794 wild horses that were ultimately sold to other buyers. The animals were in turn sold to Mexican slaughterhouses.⁹⁶ The current federal program clearly requires ever-increasing diligence and man hours to find, count, round up, protect, and otherwise manage the animals.

For more information visit:

[BLM: Wild Horses and Burro Quick Facts](#)

[GAO: Bureau of Land Management: Effective Long-Term Options Needed to Manage Unadoptable Wild Horses](#)

[DOI OIG: Investigative Report of Bureau of Land Management Wild Horse Buyer](#)

Plus, it is just plain expensive. In FY 2014 alone, costs for the program totaled \$67.9 million, 63 percent of which went to off-range holding expenses at a cost of almost \$4 per day, per animal.⁹⁷

RECOVERY

Of course Americans believe in protecting all of God's creatures, but people come first. The U.S. should stop paying to care for and feed wild animals and allow humane, private-sector solutions to manage the WHB population.

Or alternatively give every American child a free pony on his or her 8th birthday (feed and saddle not included).