

Odd Recommendations on Wild Horses

by Larry Hyslop



A 2008 wild horse gather

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) asked the National Science Academy's National Research Council (NRC) to look at how they operate their Wild Horse and Burro Program. The NRC recently released their 451-page report with what I see as some odd findings.

The NRC report summary lists 16 Key Findings, of which this column touches on five. It states that what the BLM is doing is not working, but no surprise in that since the Wild Horse and Burro Program is definitely broken.

The report looked at how the BLM counts wild horses and concluded that the national population of around 38,000 free roaming wild horses is probably 10% to 50% too low. That could mean between 41,800 and 57,000 wild horses actually living on western public land. That must irritate some wild horse advocate groups who have said for years that the BLM inflates population numbers, that there are nowhere near the 38,000 wild horses the BLM claims.

The report states that gathering and removing excess wild horses is not the best solution, again no surprise since the cost of keeping captive wild horses in long-term holding facilities is crippling the program. Some groups claim this report states the BLM must stop all gathers, but the report does not say that. It states gathers may be necessary for short-term goals but that the program needs to find other ways to control populations for the long term.

One odd conclusion comes from removing wild horses from Herd Management Areas having adequate available food. The report states this may be creating artificial conditions that promote even more population growth. It states that wild horse populations are growing at 15-20 percent each year and populations can double in four years and some of this growth is because of gathers.

It states fertility control must be used more to control population numbers, but the BLM has been working on developing such measures for years.

But then the report states that the BLM should be letting nature help control population sizes. Only limited food resources will slow population growth. Some wild horses need to be displaying poor body condition and should, indeed, be starving to death. Limited food supplies will help maintain herd sizes. This must be hard for BLM personnel to read, since they work to maintain healthy herds and range lands.

If I read this correctly, the NRC feels the BLM should slow or stop gathers of a particular Herd Management Area, even though this area provides adequate food for this controlled population. The

wild horse population will then naturally grow, until the horses over graze the range vegetation, reducing the food supply. Some of these horses will then suffer and die of starvation, but this plan will help control their numbers without the need for costly gathers.

The BLM is charged with managing public lands for multiple uses. The 1971 Wild Horse and Burrow Act states the land must be managed to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance. The NRC's report states this proposed population control plan would impact the range vegetation's abundance and composition. It states "...however, no case study has reported that the changed vegetation cannot persist over a long period of time or that complete loss of vegetation cover is an inevitable outcome." It also states "Whether such a system can persist over the long term is unknown."

The summary concludes with "...addressing the problem immediately with a long-term view is probably a more affordable and satisfactory answer than continuing to remove animals to long-term holding facilities." OK, I agree fertility control makes more sense than long-term holding, but recommending the need for starving horses is just odd.

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