

The ASPCA's Commitment to Wild Horses



Wild horses and burros, living symbols of the American West and integral bearers of our cultural heritage, have enjoyed special legal protections since the passage of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act [\[PDF\]](#) (https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/programs_wildhorse_history_doc1.pdf). That landmark legislation was a response to public outcry in an era when wild horses were being shot on the range or rounded up and sent to slaughterhouses (motivated by commercial gain or competition for rangeland). While these legal protections remain a critical component of a sustainable wild horse program, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the government agency responsible for wild horse management, has struggled to effectively manage and implement the Act. On top of that, many of the groups involved with the wild horse management issue—including animal welfare groups, landowners, conservationists and cattle ranchers—have disagreed on how best to balance the agency's mandate with their competing interests.

Without a comprehensive management framework in place, the future of the horses grows ever more dire. In 2017, when our coalition, comprised of animal welfare and wild horse advocacy groups, first proposed a management solution, the Administration and many in Congress countered by suggesting lethal methods—sale to slaughter, and mass killing.

Today, a different conversation is taking place. Technology is advancing at a rapid clip and options for how to identify, capture, treat and remove horses are improving daily, so employing a combination of strategies, focusing on an effective on-range management approach, is a way forward. We have listened to the concerns of those who live in wild horse country and are worried about the range health, wildlife habitat, and whether their businesses can survive. These conversations have been productive so far; most stakeholders in this conversation want to see the herd numbers reduced, but that doesn't mean they want to see the horses harmed in the process—which was gratifying for us to hear.

If we do nothing, the horses will not survive. Either public rangelands—their habitat—will cease to provide enough food and water, causing mass die-offs, or legislators will be convinced that no real alternatives exist, forcing them to reluctantly approve lethal options. We are committed to preventing these outcomes for our wild horses and burros.

We are confident that those who care about equines and the land on which they reside share common goals: humane treatment, ecological health and fiscal responsibility. Doing nothing will not achieve these goals and worse, will likely put these wild animals in harm's way. For more than a decade, the future of our wild mustangs has been under serious threat, but we are now on the verge of converting what has been considered by many a lost cause into a success story. For the sake of our nation's iconic herds, now is the time to come together and get to work.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does the ASPCA suggest we manage wild horses and burros?

Remaining steadfast to our principles—that wild horses be managed compassionately and without the threat of lethal methods—we envision a day when these free-roaming herds can be managed humanely and almost exclusively on the range. To achieve this goal, we must focus on these integral components of a holistic management plan:

1. **Robust fertility control program:** Comprehensive large-scale application of proven safe and humane population growth control strategies to help stabilize wild horse and

burro populations on the range and achieve a better balance in herd numbers where necessary.

2. **Strategic gathering:** Targeted gathers of horses and burros in densely populated Herd Management Areas that cannot sustain large numbers of animals to protect them from forage and water shortages and facilitate non-lethal fertility control efforts.
3. **Rehoming of horses:** Relocate horses and burros lingering in holding facilities, and those taken off the range, to large cost-effective, humane pasture facilities that provide a free-roaming environment for wild horses and burros.
4. **Increased adoptions:** Promote the adoption of wild horses and burros into good homes to improve the lives of horses and burros in holding pastures, reduce the total cost of the program, and redirect funds to long-term strategies for the care and sustainability of horse and burro populations. Provide handling and training that will dramatically improve the adoptability of rehomed horses and burros.

Does the ASPCA think we need to use fertility control for every wild horse or herd?

The only way to provide a safe future for wild horses and burros on the range is to implement an effective fertility control program. It is possible that some herd areas may not require any treatment – every herd management area is unique, and we cannot use a one size fits all approach to management. However, without fertility control, wild horses and burros will eventually reproduce unchecked and then face the threat of diminished forage and water. If they grow beyond the rangeland's ability to support them, there will be increased conflicts with other animals who rely on the same range and the BLM must by law manage for multiple uses of these lands. Realistically, protecting these herds means having a safe, reliable, and effective way to balance their populations with what the rangeland can support. We know that existing technologies such as immunocontraceptive vaccines can control herd growth as well as save public funds so that this program can enjoy strong public support into the future. To be effective, that treatment must be administered to a large percentage of the target herd and this is no easy feat in vast areas where horses are accustomed to evading capture. Thankfully, some herds are approachable on foot and therefore can be vaccinated from the ground or through methods that lure them into pens using food or water. A very small number of the overall population, approximately 3,000-5,000 animals, fit into this category. To treat the remaining herds, they must be in close proximity for application of fertility control. Therefore, the only way to accomplish this is by gathering horses from the range into holding pens. These gathers can be stressful for many individuals in the herds and so

care must be taken by those who operate helicopters or other equipment used to pressure horses into pens. The ASPCA holds the BLM and its contractors accountable to its own [Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program \(https://www.blm.gov/policy/im-2015-151\)](https://www.blm.gov/policy/im-2015-151) providing standards to ensure the safety of the herds during these gathers, transport, and handling.

Longer-lasting vaccines like PZP-22 are in final development stages and will further lower costs and stress on the herds by reducing the frequency of treatment. Should the addition of safe and humane sterilization options become possible, these programs would help increase the rate at which populations decline to a sustainable level.

Does the plan include sterilization of wild horses and burros?

The panoply of options included for population growth suppression would theoretically include some forms of sterilization. The more controversial idea of sterilizing mares has been in the public discourse for a few years and while that might be allowable under this plan, those methods would have to be proven safe and humane before being employed. Furthermore, given how involved and invasive that approach might be, the expense and the safeguards necessary for using it along with the sheer logistics of relying on that method suggest that it would be of minimal value when attempting to address a population of approximately 88,000 horses (BLM estimate). We are committed to the use of only safe and humane methods of fertility control and believe that the best way forward will be using existing technologies in the first years of this plan. Should new methods of sterilization be developed, tested, and deemed safe, they could be employed under this plan.

Doesn't the plan allow for a large number of removals wild horses and burros?

It does and that's an important aspect of how we are able to deliver effective fertility control. The approximate population of horses and burros on the range is 88,000, and the entire population grows by 15-20% each year. In order to balance and control the population, it is necessary to treat 80-90% of the horses with some form of fertility control. That means that managers must be able to get close to approximately 70,400 animals, a number well beyond the agency's physical capacity in a given year. Therefore, removals of horses from the range and into low-cost lifelong pasture facilities will be necessary on the front end of the program. As fertility control treatments take effect and population growth slows, the number of removals necessary will taper off.

How would we find low-cost lifelong pasture facilities?

Horses removed from the range would go to pasture facilities where they can live out the remainder of their natural lives. To create some of these pastures, the current long-term holding facilities could be converted to lifetime care. Other facilities would have to be incentivized through a government bidding process. Some groups stand at the ready to become stewards of off-range herds, and the animals in their care would remain titled with the BLM and continue to enjoy federal protections. The need for off-range holding will decrease over time as fertility control takes effect, removals are reduced, and adoptions are increased.

How do you hope to increase adoptions?

It is vital to inspire and promote more adoptions and we know that more homes exist for these horses. Matchmaking horses with adopters is a key strategy that will help increase these numbers. Providing horses with handling and training will dramatically improve their adoptability. In 2017, Edge Research identified 2.3 million adults who have both the resources and the desire to adopt a horse right now. This means that the BLM's adoptions each year could increase significantly with our groups' promotion and expertise. While we are committed to helping increase adoptions, the BLM cannot adopt its way out of this situation. Increasing the number of horses going to good homes would be a move in a positive direction and will help preserve more funds for other important aspects of wild horse and burro care, including the on-range fertility control work that will be key for long-term success.

How can you ensure that wild horses and burros who leave the BLM through adoptions or sales are not going to end up being slaughtered for human consumption?

We were recently very encouraged by [the BLM's decision to rescind a new sales policy \(/news/breaking-news-major-federal-victory-wild-horses-and-burros\)](#) that we worried put wild horses and burros in greater danger of ending up in slaughterhouses. That new policy removed critical protections for horses and burros sold by BLM so with the protections reinstated, the risks have been significantly reduced. The adoption program has the additional protection of requiring adopters to wait a full year before title transfers to them, making it even less likely that those horses and burros would fall into the wrong hands. There is no way to ensure the lifelong protection of any horse—domestic or wild—until we pass [the SAFE Act \(https://secure.aspca.org/action/safe-act?ms=wb_con_animal-protection-public-policy-wild-horses-advocacy-alert-safe-act-20190422&initialms=wb_con_animal-protection-public-policy-wild-horses-advocacy-](#)

[alert-safe-act-20190422](#)), but we are pleased to see the BLM taking care to help protect the wild horses and burros who are adopted or sold.

Will the humane management plan actually work?

The ASPCA worked with population ecologists and economists to develop modeling to determine the viability of this plan, how much it would cost, and how long it would take to work. We found that a combination of removals and lower-cost, long-term pasture, widespread implementation of fertility control, and increased adoptions could lead to sustainable population numbers within 10 years—if and only if the plan is adopted and implemented swiftly.

How much will the plan cost?

Any pathway forward for the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program is going to require an influx of funds—in fact, doing nothing at all is a particularly costly decision. The plan that we support would require an upfront investment in the short term, but in the long term it would generate considerable cost savings for the federal government. In fact, by the tenth year of its implementation, our plan will cost less than the projected cost of BLM's status quo management methods in the same year. And the humane management plan has the added bonus that wild horse and burro populations on-range will remain at a constant level, rather than growing exponentially under the BLM's current methods. Wild horse and burro management is ultimately the responsibility of the federal government but the ASPCA is committed to assisting the BLM with this plan in our areas of expertise, such as increasing adoptions.

Why are you working with groups who have historically been opponents on this issue and many others?

We believe it is vital to work with anyone who is willing to help find positive solutions—as long as those measures truly are humane—which is why we have agreed to collaborate with groups we don't agree with on all fronts. Some will say it isn't appropriate to work with those who advocate against wild horse protection in other arenas. We think these are precisely the individuals and organizations who need to provide input toward finding a lasting solution.

What has emerged from dialogue with these other interests is an agreement to stop talking about sending these animals to slaughter and to bypass the idea of killing them on the range. Stakeholders are beginning to agree that *population growth suppression is the*

key to sustainable management. This also means that we hope to avoid having annual, hair-raising battles over whether tax dollars will be used to kill healthy wild horses by the thousands or to sell them off to slaughter. The ASPCA, as part of a humane coalition, has boldly and thoughtfully proposed a comprehensive and proactive plan to the BLM using non-lethal, humane, and effective strategies. Our work is far from over, but real progress has been made.

Where do we go from here?

With a strong coalition comprised of groups representing a wide variety of interests, we must turn our attention to those who ultimately control the fate of our treasured herds: Congress and the BLM. Funding for and implementation of a humane and sustainable management plan for wild horses and burros rests on the shoulders of these two interrelated governmental bodies. Realistically, our plan or any other is going to require an influx of funds to the Wild Horse and Burro Program. Our goal is to ensure that these funds are secured and implemented in a way that provides comprehensive, humane care for these horses and burros. Importantly, the U.S. House and Senate Appropriations Committees, who allocate the BLM's funds, recently articulated their desire for such a plan in their Fiscal Year 2019 report. Time is of the essence, and your voice matters. **[Please join the ASPCA Advocacy Brigade \(https://secure.asPCA.org/take-action/horse-advocacy-brigade?ms=wb_con_animal-protection-wild-horses-registration-advocacy-brigade-20210826&initialms=wb_con_animal-protection-wild-horses-registration-advocacy-brigade-20210826\)](https://secure.asPCA.org/take-action/horse-advocacy-brigade?ms=wb_con_animal-protection-wild-horses-registration-advocacy-brigade-20210826&initialms=wb_con_animal-protection-wild-horses-registration-advocacy-brigade-20210826)** for updates and to be alerted when we need your help.



https://secure.aspca.org/donate/donate-equine-t1-p1?ms=wb_rig_ad-donate-horse-20220520&initialms=wb_rig_ad-donate-horse-20220520&pcode=WEBMEMBER&lpcode=WEBGUARD

Other Ways to Help:

[Become a Monthly Member](https://secure.aspca.org/donate/join?ms=wb_rig_otherways&initialms=wb_rig_otherways&pcode=WEBMEMBER&lpcode=WEBGUARD)

https://secure.aspca.org/donate/join?ms=wb_rig_otherways&initialms=wb_rig_otherways&pcode=WEBMEMBER&lpcode=WEBGUARD

[Join the Advocacy Brigade](https://secure.aspca.org/take-action/join-the-advocacy-brigade?ms=wb_rig_otherways&initialms=wb_rig_otherways)

https://secure.aspca.org/take-action/join-the-advocacy-brigade?ms=wb_rig_otherways&initialms=wb_rig_otherways

[ms=wb_rig_otherways&initialms=wb_rig_otherways](https://secure.aspca.org/take-action/join-the-advocacy-brigade?ms=wb_rig_otherways&initialms=wb_rig_otherways)

