

FREES Statement to Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board, June 30, 2021

The Free-roaming Equid and Ecosystem Sustainability Network (FREES) is a grass-roots effort committed to facilitating open dialogue and building positive relationships that engage all partners in collective actions to ensure the health of free-roaming horses and burros, western rangeland ecosystem health and sustainability, and the principles of multiple-use. FREES works to achieve the goal of healthy herds on healthy rangelands by promoting opportunities to engage others who might have different perspectives or experiences regarding the management of free-roaming horses and burros and lands they inhabit.

FREES has conducted annual national Summits in Salt Lake City, Reno, and Cody to bring stakeholders together in open dialogue to seek consensus on management approaches that would achieve the stated goal of healthy herds on healthy rangelands. Between Summits, FREES conducts much of its work through working groups which include population management, range management, and communications and outreach.

FREES is committed to better understanding and respecting individual opinions while striving to develop meaningful, actionable objectives to be implemented judiciously, compassionately, humanely, and expeditiously. FREES endorses diversity and seeks to engage diverse publics in developing solutions that are consensus based and agreeable to the preponderance of public land and free-roaming horse and burro stakeholders. FREES also recognizes that there is not one single solution, and as such strives identify innovative and practical strategies that are scientifically sound and are within the purview of the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, Native American Tribes, and the states. To fund these strategies, FREES recognizes that the U.S. Congress and Executive Branch, state legislatures, non-governmental organizations, and private individuals must be fully engaged.

FREES recognizes that the unprecedented drought the west is currently experiencing has exacerbated the situation to create an ecological

catastrophe that is an indictment of both personal, collective, and governmental failures to act to reduce overabundant free-roaming horse and burro populations. The consequences for free-roaming horses and burros, wildlife, and the rangeland ecosystems they inhabit, now further compounded by drought and on-going climate change, will be realized for many years to come. We must act now.

As there are multiple coalitions and groups convening to address the needs of free-roaming horse and burros, achieving broad consensus and actions across the spectrum of diverse stakeholders is unlikely.

However, FREES participants represent over 90 interested agencies and organizations. That agree in principle on the following underlying tenets.

- Free-roaming horses and burros must be managed in a manner that is respectful of animal welfare, other multiple-use on public lands, and recognition that rangeland health must be maintained.
- Each area inhabited by free-roaming horses and burros is unique and should be managed and prioritized for action based on the ecological conditions, current population status, and the desired health of land and all animals and humans inhabiting it.
- Most herd management areas inhabited by free-roaming horse and burros have exceeded ecological carrying capacity.
- Gathers are the only means for removing excess free-roaming horse and burros. Gathers should continue to integrate fertility control options simultaneously with animal removal.
- Achieving ecologically sustainable populations of on-range free-roaming horses and burros through non-lethal means will require a significant initial investment that will decrease over time as more efficient fertility control methods become available and horse and burro numbers in holding facilities decrease through adoption and natural mortality.
- Free-roaming horse and burro fertility management research must be supported to develop new and improve existing techniques, with the understanding that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution so multiple approaches will be necessary.

- Unified messaging to the U. S. Congress and the American public is essential to better inform them about free-roaming horse and burros, management needs and concerns, and irreversible ecological impacts to ecosystems of overabundant populations to gain support for long-term funding.