

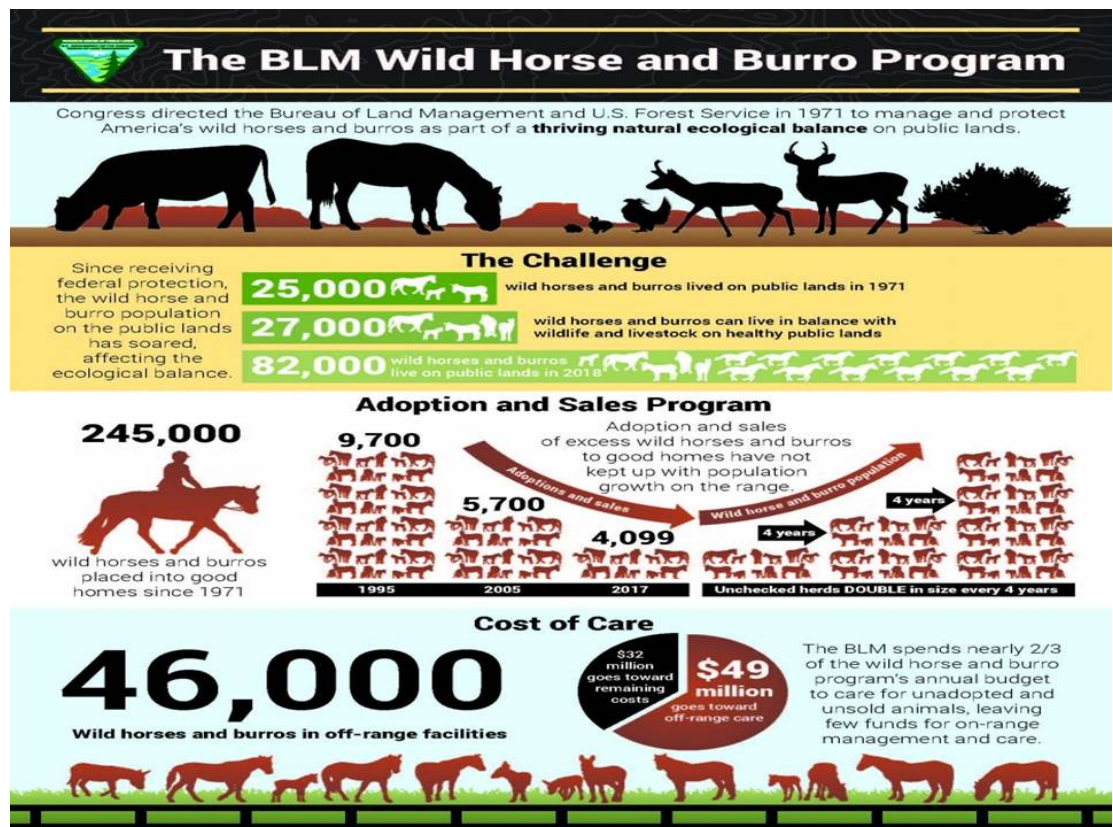


Free Roaming Equids and Ecosystem Sustainability Network

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The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act (WFRHBA) gave the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) the statutory obligation to manage and protect free-roaming (feral) equids (i.e., wild horse and burros [WHBs]) in designated herd management areas (HMAs) within the sagebrush biome. The intent of the WFRHBA was to ensure healthy populations of free-roaming equids, defined as WHBs, on HMAs in ecological balance with other multiple-uses. As of March 1, 2018, ecological balance referred as the appropriate management level for BLM-administered WHB herds was set at 26,690. In March 2019, the BLM estimated that there were 88,090 WHBs inhabiting designated HMAs, and surrounding herd areas. Overabundant WHBs and other free-roaming equids are impacting the overall health of the western rangelands by degrading ecosystem functions and reducing the forage, cover, and water available for wildlife. The WFRHBA identified tools that the BLM and USFS could use in the management WHBs. The U.S. Congress has repeatedly blocked the use of two of the tools (i.e., the sale of WHBs without limitation and euthanasia) which had been historically used to manage populations. Without active management to reduce growth rates, the on-range WHB population within 4 years could exceed 160,000. By 2035, over 1 million WHBs could inhabit western rangelands. As herds increase, it is anticipated that more WHBs will die from dehydration, starvation, and vehicle collisions, and that their impacts on native wildlife and rangelands will become irreversible. The BLM and USFS have retained the ability to gather WHBs in areas where the populations are impacting the rangeland and the health of the animals is

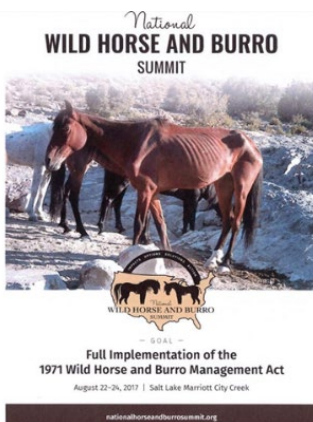
compromised. If gathered animals are not adopted or sold under applicable legal limitations, the agencies must care for them for the remainder of their lives. In Fiscal Year 2018, the BLM spent \$49.8 million, 61% of its \$81.2 million budget to care for animals in holding facilities. Public stakeholder support will be required to achieve AML.



What is the Free Roaming Equids and Ecosystem Sustainability Network?

Despite the documented negative ecological impacts of WHBs and other free-roaming equids, public stakeholders hold them in high regard. As Congress, the BLM, USFS, Native tribes, and the states begin to pursue WHB and free-roaming equid management options, all must develop, implement, and evaluate proactive public outreach programs that inform the public about the "tradeoffs" that could result from the failure to implement the WFRHBA.

The human-dimensions of 'wild horse and burros' management are less understood than the ecological or biological problems. For biological considerations, over 9 billion agricultural animals are slaughtered in the United States each year. In the name of humaneness, an estimated 1.5 million companion animals are euthanized on an annual basis. Contemporary WHB management policies, which include a legacy of administrative and political constraints on euthanizing healthy horses suggest that WHBs are valued above all other animals in contemporary U.S. society.



A 2013 survey of 1,247 registered voters by Public Policy Polling, Raleigh, NC (information@publicpolling.com) reported that 71% of the respondents were aware that WHBs roamed western public rangelands, and 72% felt they should be protected. When respondents were asked if they thought the program was being managed efficiently; 62% agreed that it was not. Survey respondents were not informed that WHBs populations threatened the ecological balance of western rangelands, were impacting other legal multiple-uses of public lands, and that fertility control methods alone are not a viable option given the current herd sizes. In 2017, the Berryman Institute, Utah State University, hosted a Summit in Salt Lake City, Utah to discuss the "full implementation of the WFRHBA." Participation was by invitation and included over 250 representatives from 109 public, private, and tribal agencies and organizations. Summit

participants were concerned about the impact of overabundant free-roaming equid population numbers on rangeland resources. They believed that fertility control and adoptions alone could not manage populations and mitigate resource impacts. All respondents, whether those who attended the 2017 Summit or those that responded to the Public Polling Policy Surveys expressed dissatisfaction with the current program status quo. To date, no rigorous study of U.S. public attitudes and knowledge regarding the management of WHBs has been completed. Subsequent the Summit, the Berryman Institute, Utah State University, published a special issue of Human-Wildlife Interactions on the management of wild horse and burros.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/hwi/vol12/iss1/>

Human–Wildlife Interactions (HWI) is the only scientific journal dedicated specifically to publishing manuscripts that report research, management case studies, and policy perspectives designed to enhance the professional management of human–wildlife conflicts.

