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PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT

**Observations on Management of
Federal Wild Horse Program**

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate



Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss our report¹ on the federal wild horse program administered by the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). That report, issued last summer, made a number of recommendations to improve program operations. Since we issued our report we have not followed up with additional review work. However, on the basis of BLM comments on our report and subsequent information provided by BLM, the agency has begun taking actions in response to our recommendations.

Overall, we share BLM's view that the management problems associated with the wild horse program have proven to be among the most difficult that BLM faces. Satisfying the dual legislative mandate of protecting wild horse populations while at the same time protecting the rangelands they roam from deterioration is not an easy task. Furthermore, some management techniques employed by the agency in the past (particularly those involving the mass disposal of wild horses removed from the range) have either been rejected by the public and the Congress or are proving to be unworkable. After years of effort and the expenditure of millions of dollars, the same basic problems remain.

To fundamentally address the problems that have characterized this program over the years, management approaches built upon an overall rangeland strategy that addresses the impact of domestic livestock and wildlife in addition to wild horses are needed. On a number of recent occasions, BLM has signaled its commitment to managing the public lands in a fashion that better balances the interests of its traditional uses--including livestock grazing and mineral development--with those of more recently recognized needs

¹Rangeland Management: Improvements Needed in Federal Wild Horse Program (GAO/RCED-90-110, Aug. 20, 1990).

such as wildlife, resource protection, and outdoor recreation. We are hopeful that in this spirit workable solutions to the wild horse management problem can be found.

In my statement today I would like to provide some very brief background information on the wild horse program and then summarize our report's principal findings and recommendations. I would also like to briefly discuss BLM's actions in response to those recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Concerned about the possibility that wild horse populations in the West would be eradicated by widespread abuse and exploitation, the Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act in 1971 to grant the animals special protection. Reflecting subsequent concerns about the degradation of rangeland resources, the Congress amended the law in 1978 to authorize removal of animals determined to be "excess" in order to maintain a "thriving ecological balance" on the land. Under this authority, BLM has rounded up, removed, and disposed of more than 80,000 wild horses from federal rangelands since 1980. About three-fourths of these horses have been adopted through BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program, which allows individuals to obtain title to up to four horses a year for \$125 each. In an effort to enhance the adoptability of wild horses, BLM in recent years has been sending some horses to state prisons to be "gentled" by inmates who halter train them. However, all the wild horses removed from the range have not proven to be adoptable because of age or physical imperfection. Accordingly, from 1984 through September 1988, BLM placed about 20,000 wild horses with large-scale adopters who agreed to take a minimum of 100 horses when BLM waived the normal adoption fee (the so-called fee waiver program). This program was terminated in response to widespread congressional and public concerns about the treatment of

the adopted horses. Since the summer of 1988, BLM has placed unadoptable horses in private sanctuaries.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

Our August 1990 report found that the federal wild horse program has experienced a number of problems. In particular, we reported that BLM was removing thousands of horses from the range each year without the land condition data that would enable it to determine how many wild horses the land could support (carrying capacity) and how many needed to be removed to meet this capacity. We found that BLM was making its removal decisions on the basis of an interest in reaching perceived historic population levels or the recommendations of advisory groups largely comprised of livestock permittees. Our findings were consistent with those of Interior's Board of Land Appeals, which ruled that BLM removal actions aimed at reaching perceived historic population levels were contrary to the requirements of the Wild Horses Act. Because of the associated restrictions placed on removal activities, the number of wild horses removed has dropped dramatically in recent years.

We further found that the large-scale wild horse removals BLM undertook in the mid- and late-1980s overwhelmed its ability to routinely dispose of them through its generally successful Adopt-A-Horse program. The subsequent build-up of horses in holding facilities led BLM to devise and implement mass disposal alternatives that resulted in either widespread commercial exploitation of the horses involved or a long-term federal financial responsibility for the horses' welfare. Specifically, we reported that BLM's fee waiver adoption program led to the inhumane treatment and eventual slaughter of thousands of horses. Furthermore, we reported that private wild horse sanctuaries--the mass disposal option BLM designed to replace the fee-waiver adoption program--would probably not achieve its stated objective

of being self-sustaining within 3 years; the government would either have to commit to long-term financial support of the sanctuaries or be prepared to have the horses returned to its custody.

Finally, we reported that BLM's program for enhancing the adoptability of horses by halter-training them at prison facilities needed tighter management controls to minimize costs and improve performance. These controls were needed to ensure that only horses of an adoptable age entered the training facilities and that the horses did not remain in these facilities for an excessive length of time.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

We made a number of recommendations to help correct the problems we identified. To help ensure that BLM's wild horse program removal decisions were made on a rational basis, we called upon the agency to expeditiously develop the prerequisite carrying capacity and range condition data. We further recommended that future wild horse removals based on these data be made in the context of an overall range improvement strategy that also considered the impact of domestic livestock on range conditions.

Concerning the disposal side of the program, we recommended a number of specific actions to enhance internal controls over the prison training program. We also recommended that BLM consider other disposal and population control options for horses determined to be unadoptable (such as sterilization) and, where necessary, seek congressional authority to implement them.

BLM RESPONSE TO OUR REPORT

By and large, BLM has responded favorably to our findings and recommendations. Regarding our recommendation to make wild horse

removal decisions in the context of an overall range improvement strategy, BLM is currently implementing a comprehensive management plan in Nevada, the state with the largest number of wild horses. According to BLM officials, Nevada forage allocation decisions among livestock, wild horses, and other wildlife will be based on a determination of the range's carrying capacity and on the monitoring of the impact of the species on the range over time. Officials estimate that allocation decisions have been made on 20 percent of the range and that the process will take about 4 to 5 years to complete statewide. According to BLM officials, current average wild horse removal and disposal costs are in the range of \$1,400 a head. With expenses at this level it is important that removal decisions be based on sound data.

As for BLM's procedures for disposing of wild horses removed from the range, the Bureau has made a number of improvements. It published a final rule in September 1990 that makes it extremely difficult for one person to gain control over a large number of wild horses. By eliminating the primary mechanism (powers-of-attorney) used by some individuals and groups to acquire wild horses for the purposes of sending them to the slaughterhouses, this rule significantly reduces the likelihood that wild horses removed from the range will experience commercial exploitation. BLM has also concurred in our judgment that the largest sanctuary will not become financially self-sustaining and that it should be closed when its 3-year trial period ends in August 1991. Finally, BLM has taken a number of actions to improve the prison halter training effort, including establishing quality standards for the training being provided, implementing tighter controls over the age of horses receiving training, and limiting the amount of time horses can spend in training facilities.

Let me close by saying that there are no easy answers to the problem of what to do with wild horses legitimately determined to exceed what the land can support. BLM's Adopt-A-Horse program has

shown itself to be capable of handling perhaps 5,000 to 6,000 horses a year. Removals higher than this level call for consideration of a number of disposal options not currently in place. As stated in our report, these options include sterilization and humane destruction of excess animals. A recent study by the University of Minnesota, which was reviewed by the National Research Council, concluded that implanting contraceptives into prime age mares would significantly slow the growth of the herds. Further, the study states that this procedure would be cost-effective compared with other management procedures available for controlling populations. The destruction of healthy, unadopted wild horses, while authorized under the Wild Horses Act if necessary to protect the range, has been prohibited for the last 3 years by annual appropriations language and is not currently an option for herd management.

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This concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to respond to any questions at this time.