



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Draft Position Statement

In accordance with TWS policy, The Wildlife Society Council seeks member review and comment on the following draft position statement, Feral Horses and Burros in North America, prior to revising and finalizing it. **Comments must be received by 1 February 2011** to be considered in a final position statement.

Please send comments to: Laura Bies, Director of Government Affairs, at the address above or via email to laura@wildlife.org.

Feral Horses and Burros in North America

Feral horses and burros are exotic species in North America. Exotic, or non-native, species are among the most widespread and serious threats to the integrity of native wildlife populations because of their potential to invade and degrade native ecosystems. Exotic plant and animal species present special challenges for wildlife managers because their impacts on the native biota are poorly understood by the general public, and many people regard them as a component of the natural ecosystem. As a result, some exotic species have advocacy groups that promote their continued presence in landscapes where they are not native, and few policies and laws deal directly with control of the species. Feral horses (*Equus caballus*) and burros (*E. asinus*) that roam freely across western North America are examples of such species: they are iconic and much-loved by some, but damage wildlife habitat and require improved and sustainable management practices.

Feral horses in North America are descendants of domestic horses introduced by Spaniards in the late 1500s and subsequently became feral; burros were domesticated over 5000 years ago from wild ancestors native to northeast Africa. Although many now-extinct horse lineages evolved in North America, today's feral horses are not descendants of the North American equids of the Pleistocene, and these modern-day horses are not members of the same species as North American fossil specimens. Since native North American horses went extinct over 10,000 years ago, the western United States has become more arid and many of the horses' natural predators, such as the American lion and saber-toothed cat, have also gone extinct, changing the ecosystem and the role horses play. Today, scientists consider horses and burros to be a recent and disruptive addition to North American ecology, rather than a native species.

Feral herds of horses and burros can cause significant damage to the environment. Currently, estimates suggest that these herds range across more than 45 million acres in ten American states and two Canadian provinces. Large herbivores (both native and non-native) can disturb landscapes by trampling soils and vegetation, selectively grazing palatable plants, and altering the distribution of nutrients in the ecosystem. Studies in the Great Basin have shown that areas inhabited by feral horses tend to have fewer plant species and less plant cover than areas without horses, as well as more invasive plant species such as cheatgrass, which itself is widely known as poor wildlife habitat.

The small reptiles and mammals in the western North American ecoregion that depend on burrows and brush cover to survive and breed are less abundant in horse-occupied sites. These reptiles and mammals are an important component of the desert ecology because they provide a link between different parts of the food web, and perform numerous critical ecosystem functions. Consequently, if their populations are severely reduced or disappear entirely, the larger ecosystem begins to unravel. Additionally, free-ranging horses typically use higher elevations and steeper slopes than cattle, often moving to higher elevations for grazing, defense, and temperature control. When horses are added to an ecosystem, little native habitat, from grassy plains to steeper rockier areas, is left undisturbed. Pronghorns (*Antilocapra americana*) and bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) avoid water sources when horses are present, further limiting their access to water in arid and semiarid environments. The diet of feral burros overlaps a great deal with that of bighorn sheep and uncontrolled burro populations have been predicted to lead to devegetation and a decline in the populations of bighorn sheep and other native animals.

A variety of management practices have been in use by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) since Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act in 1971. Existing management practices include periodic population counts and rapid assessments of ecosystem status in order to determine where overpopulation exists; roundups to capture and transport animals; use of contraception to manage population size; adoption of animals to private owners; and the humane destruction of old, ailing, or unadoptable animals. However, management involving euthanasia, and sometimes the roundups, is severely restricted by popular opinion. While the public and interest groups express concern for the affected horses and burros, they often fail to consider the conservation of other plants and animals in the ecosystem, as well as the likelihood horses and burros will die from starvation, thirst, and exposure when their numbers exceed the ability of the land to support them.

Due to public opinion, animals passed over for adoption are not euthanized; instead, they are placed into short- or long-term holding facilities. The proposal released by the Secretary of the Interior in late 2009 called for horses to be transported to and contained within enclosures in the Midwest. The number of animals adopted annually has declined in recent years, necessitating additional holding facilities. In turn, program costs are rising to unsustainable levels and diverting funding that could be used to manage and sustain habitats for native wildlife. Sound, scientifically-based horse and burro management practices should be employed to protect the highly sensitive arid and semiarid ecosystems of the West and keep taxpayer costs to an acceptable level.

The policy of The Wildlife Society regarding feral horses and burros is to:

1. Encourage the Department of the Interior and BLM to consider the habitat needs of all native wildlife and plants when developing, revising, and/or implementing herd management plans. Encourage the BLM to include wildlife biologists in planning teams.
2. Recommend that horse and burro inventories are performed at a frequency sufficient to quickly determine which herd management areas are overpopulated and rapidly implement management plans to control and reduce ecological damage.

3. Support the use of round-ups as a humane way to remove horses from rangeland for adoption by private citizens.
4. Recognize that adoption programs are a socially acceptable method for removal and relocation of horses and burros, but that the pool of possible adoptive candidates is declining and adoption will not be a viable long-term solution to overpopulation.
5. Support euthanasia as a humane method for removal of old, ailing, or unadoptable horses.
6. Recognize that no horse or burro management plan should depend solely on fertility control given the uncertainty, logistical difficulty, and great expense that still exist regarding these methods. Support continued funding for fertility-control programs for feral horses and burros, and encourage continued research into improved fertility-control methods.
7. Support increased funding for scientifically-defensible assessments of ecosystem condition that are used to make decisions about feral horses or burro management. Such assessments should consider the welfare of the feral horses and burros, as well as the ability of the system to conserve native plant and animal populations and provide ecosystem services -- like clean air, clean water, and carbon sequestration.
8. Cooperate with the conservation and animal-welfare communities to educate the public and key decision makers about the negative impact of feral horses and burros on all native wildlife, including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and endangered species.