

## **West on brink of wild horse crisis**

Study: Government won't be able to cope

By Brad Plumer

The Washington Post

The West is on the verge of a serious horse crisis. That's the upshot of a new paper in *Science*, which argues that the wild horse population is growing so fast that the government could soon be unable to manage the herds.

Here's the back-story: There are currently some 33,000 wild horses roaming freely on public lands in the western United States, descendants of horses brought by Spanish conquistadors. Under a 1971 law, the Bureau of Land Management is supposed to protect these horses and make sure their numbers don't get out of hand — so that they're not destroying the ecosystem or dying of starvation.

But that's easier said than done, and BLM has long struggled to bring the horse population down to the mandated level of 23,622. There are, after all, only a few thousand people willing to adopt horses each year. And Congress has largely restricted the slaughter of healthy horses.

So, in recent years, BLM has been rounding up excess horses and shipping them off to long-term "retirement" facilities — mainly private ranches in Kansas and Oklahoma. The problem is that this is expensive: There are now 45,000 horses in these facilities, and BLM's horse budget has soared from \$19.8million in 2000 to \$74.9million in 2012.

Lately, Congress has started reining in spending here. BLM has announced that it will remove fewer horses from public lands. At the same time, the wild horses keep breeding, with unmanaged herds able to triple in size in just six to eight years.

Put it all together, and it's a looming disaster.

The *Science* paper, written by Robert A. Garrott of the University of Montana and Madan K. Oli of the University of Florida, calculates that if current trends continue, BLM would have to spend some \$1.1billion over the next 17 years just to keep storing horses in these long-term facilities — a level far beyond anything Congress would accept.

And if round-ups are no longer an option, then the number of wild horses on U.S. public lands will start swelling — dramatically. "The worry is we'll end up like Australia," says Garrott. Out in Australia, the wild horse population has soared past 400,000, and the government is now reportedly considering shooting tens of thousands of horses in the outback, both to stop the destruction of range land and to alleviate the suffering of horses that have been slowly dying of thirst during a recent drought.

"Some horse advocates have argued that we should just let the horses self-regulate on public lands," Garrott says. "But what do we do when animals are destroying rangeland, competing with livestock and other wildlife and dying due to starvation and drought? That's not good for the horses, it's not good for the range, it's not good for anyone." He notes that BLM has already been straining to deliver water to horses in Utah and Nevada during this summer's drought.

In their paper, Garrott and Oli argue that it's long past time to get America's horse issues under control. That would start with an aggressive vaccine contraceptives program to cut the birthrates of the wild horses by half. But contraception by itself, they note, is insufficient. BLM would also need to remove many of the horses from public lands.

There are two broad ways to do that: Congress could appropriate many more millions of dollars to have BLM store even more wild horses in long-term pastures. Or — and this is the grislier possibility — the government could kill off thousands of healthy horses. Horse slaughter is subject to a huge amount of controversy, and horse-meat plants have been closed ever since Congress pulled funding for inspectors in 2007.

Lawmakers have since reinstated those funds, but the reopening of slaughterhouses has still been bogged down by legal disputes. Valley Meat Co., in Roswell, has been pushing for almost two years for permission to convert its cattle plant into a horse slaughterhouse.

Either way, the Science paper argues, if Congress and BLM could figure out how to get the number of wild horses down to around 23,000 or so — and soon — then contraceptives plus adoptions could likely keep the population at a sustainable level.



ALAN BERNER/SEATTLE TIMES/MCT

These corralled wild horses at the Yakama Indian Nation in Washington were likely headed to Mexico or Canada for slaughter. Wild horses are a growing problem for many tribes in the United States.