



Destiny of the wild ones

On 11,000 acres in North Dakota, a family band of wild horses thunders across the rangeland, their hoof beats echoing like those of their ancestors in prehistoric times. In Illinois, another herd of mustangs arrives at a processing plant, where the horses are slaughtered, the meat shipped overseas for human consumption.

On December 8, 2004, Senator Conrad Burns (R-Montana) added to the 2005 Appropriations Bill an amendment to the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, allowing the commercial sale of wild horses. Since passage of this amendment, mustangs have been shipped from long-term holding facilities to livestock auctions, where they are oftentimes bought by processing plants. Thirty years of protections for the wild horse ended with passage of the Burns Amendment, and it is only through public outcry that this action can be reversed.

Why was the Burns Amendment entered at all? The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is tasked with managing our nation's public rangelands, including the animals on that land: cattle and sheep through grazing permits, and wildlife such as wild horses. The Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 provides for the "continuance of the law protecting wild free-roaming horses and burros from capture, branding, harassment or death, while at the same time facilitating the removal and disposal of excess wild free-roaming horses and burros which pose a threat to themselves and their habitat...."

Round-ups of mustangs are conducted by the BLM, usually with helicopters. Gathered horses are made available to the public for adoption, the placements supervised for one year before title of the horse is granted to the owner. Those mustangs not adopted after three attempts, or those collected that are over ten years old, are deemed "excess animals" and shipped to long-term holding facilities, where the horses are held indefinitely.

These facilities are now full, but the horses in them are not backyard ponies. They are wild animals, no different in sensibility than a moose or an elk. One horse trainer from Groesbeck, Texas tells of running from a mustang that attacked with teeth bared, "hooves striking to kill." It took two long hours to buckle a halter on the head of one confined horse. Those adopting a wild horse accept a time-consuming and dangerous endeavor, and yet many horses have successfully adapted to captivity. However, not all horses are adopted, and the BLM continues with its removal policy, with no place to keep the horses.



The American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign (AWHPC) promotes an agenda of nothing less than reorganization of the entire wild horse and burro management program. Formed by a coalition of public interest groups, environmentalists, and humane organizations such as the Humane Society

of the United States, the AWHPC demands that removal of wild horses be immediately stopped, while an independent study is conducted on animal numbers and habitat. In fact, the AWHPC calls for an in-the-wild management program for the horses, rather than removal from public lands of any kind. Finally, the AWHPC implores the public and lawmakers to support new legislation, to protect the wild horses as they were prior to the Burns Amendment.



Some ranchers argue that cattle grazing leases are a more logical use of the West's vast lands, however wild horse advocacy groups maintain it is not cost-efficient to remove the horses to subsidize cattle ranches. Some wild horse advocates compare the BLM managing the mustangs to the fox guarding the henhouse, the BLM historically showing preference to

ranchers over unprotected wild horse herds.

Most would agree that realistic management of the wild horses is necessary, and public lands must be shared. However, long-term logical solutions are needed to preserve our nation's wild mustangs, which could be achieved through close coordination between the Bureau of Land Management and wild horse advocacy groups.

To protect those excess animals currently at high risk in holding facilities, wild horse sanctuaries, such as the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary in North Dakota, could take in these older horses and those that cannot be tamed.

The first step is passage of the Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Burro Act of 2005. This proposed law will amend the Burns rider by allowing commercial sale of wild horses, but with restrictions similar to adoption, including a supervisory period of one year.

Write, and call, your legislators. Demand they support the Wild Horse Act of 2005, to humanely manage the wild horse populations, and restrict the commercial sale of wild horses.

Let the destiny of the wild ones be a future of freedom.

This article was written in 2005. To learn more: www.wildhorsepreservation.com