

Q&A

Using Science to Improve the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program: A Way Forward

Q *Why was this study needed?*

A In 1971 Congress tasked the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with the “protection, management, and control of wild free-roaming horses and burros on public lands.” BLM is also responsible for managing these lands for other uses, such as recreation, mining, forestry, livestock grazing, and habitat for wildlife. Managing these sometimes competing interests and maintaining a “thriving natural ecological balance on public lands,” as the law mandates, has proved challenging.

To maintain that balance, BLM established Herd Management Areas in locations where the horses and burros were found in 1971 and limited them to these areas. Horses and burros are rounded up (gathered) and removed when a thriving natural ecological balance is threatened.

The Wild Horse and Burro Program is facing a financial crisis because most animals removed from Herd Management Areas are not adopted by private owners. The expense of maintaining unadopted animals in long-term holding facilities for the rest of their lives consumes about half of the program’s budget. BLM approached the National Research Council with a study as part of its response to the Senate’s request to prepare a comprehensive plan and policy for management of free-ranging horses and burros. The National Research Council committee was tasked with investigating ways BLM could use the best science available to improve management of horses and burros on the range. In fulfilling its task, the committee’s goal is to provide BLM with tools that could be used to decrease the use of and spending on holding facilities and to manage healthy populations on the range.

Q *What topics does the study cover?*

A This study is an independent evaluation of the science, methodology, and technical decision making approaches of the Wild Horse and Burro Program. In evaluating the program, the study builds on the findings of three prior reports prepared by the NRC in 1980, 1982, and 1991. The report also summarizes additional, relevant research completed since the three earlier reports were prepared.

The committee based its findings and conclusions on a number of sources. Committee members examined peer-reviewed scientific literature on free-ranging horses and burros in the United States and in other countries. It analyzed data on free-ranging horse and burro populations and genetics provided by BLM and other experts. Germane studies of the biology, physiology, and behavioral ecology of domestic horses and burros, Przewalski’s horses (wild horses native to central Asia), native equid species on other continents, and free-ranging ungulates in the United States and elsewhere were also assessed.

The analysis addresses several key scientific challenges and questions, including assessing the strengths and limitations of population models, identifying ways to estimate free-ranging horse

(continued)

and burro populations more accurately, and investigating the implications of genetic diversity for their long-term health, and how they interact with the environment. The report also evaluates predator impact on free-ranging horse and burro populations, assesses the effects of management actions, such as treating animals with contraceptives or removing animals from the range, and identifies additional research needs and opportunities to fill data gaps, reduce uncertainty, and improve decision-making.

Q *What are the report's main findings?*

A The study found that continuing “business as usual” will be expensive and unproductive for BLM and the public it serves. Compelling evidence exists that there are more horses and burros on public rangelands than reported at the national level and that population growth rates are high. If populations are not actively managed, the abundance of horses and burros on public rangelands will increase until animals face food limitation. They would then affect forage and water to levels detrimental for themselves as well as for all other animals on shared rangelands, potentially conflicting with the multiple-use policy and the legislative mandate to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance.

Promisingly, tools already exist for BLM to address many of these challenges. Available improvements to current management practices include better methods for estimating population size, more effective use of modeling to predict the results of management actions, greater use of fertility-control treatments, application of genetics information to herd management, and improved methods for measuring the amount of available forage. Addressing those issues with science-based management approaches that are applied consistently and communicated transparently to the public could help increase public confidence in the Wild Horse and Burro Program.

For more information, contact the Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources at (202) 334-3062 or visit <http://dels.nas.edu/banr>. Download this report for free or purchase the hard copy from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20001; (800) 624-6242; www.nap.edu.