

Government Proposal Aims to Improve Wild Horse Management

A new plan proposed by the Department of the Interior would move a living symbol of the old west to the east.

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In the 1970s, the Bureau of Land Management took over the then-dwindling herds of wild horses and burros to help restore their population. Today wild horse numbers have flourished to the point where management has become a challenge. With no natural predators, overpopulation of wild horses has become a serious environmental concern with an estimated 37,000 wild horses living on western rangelands. The BLM has struggled in recent years to find a solution that is in the best interests of the horses, their habitat, and concerned citizens.

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar has proposed the creation of Mustang sanctuaries in the east and Midwest to help manage the herds of wild horses and burros currently located in western states where overgrazing, drought and wildfires threaten the horses and their habitat. Additionally, the plan would help find a solution for the nearly 32,000 Mustangs currently in BLM holding areas.

According to the proposal, open grasslands in the east would provide a sustainable habitat for the horses and burros currently roaming the arid west. The new, eastern preserves would be maintained by the BLM, possibly with assistance from other organizations, similar to a previous proposal by Madeleine Pickens. The BLM would continue to manage the population of wild horses through fertility control and management of the male to female ratio in the herds. The proposal would also open up the possibility of gelding the male horses to create non-reproducing herds.

Another key point of the proposal promotes managing the herds as an attraction for ecotourism. According to Salazar's proposal, this would highlight the importance of wild horses as an American legacy and promote economic growth in rural communities near the eastern and western Mustang preserves.

Critics of the plan include filmmaker Ginger Kathrens, known for her documentary series centered on a Mustang colt known as Cloud. The Cloud Foundation, an organization of wild horse enthusiasts of which Kathrens is executive director, responded to the Salazar's proposal by suggesting that the horses remain on existing western rangelands rather than being moved across the country.

"It would seem that the best use of taxpayer dollars and the most humane plan for the nearly 32,000 wild horses in government holding would be to return them to their native lands" says Kathrens. "These millions of acres were identified for use by wild horses and burros and these lands are already owned by the American public."

Some critics have also expressed concern that Salazar's plan favors cattle ranchers who compete with the wild horses for grazing land and suggest that cattle and other livestock should be removed to make way for Mustangs, not the other way around.

The BLM counters this allegation with the following statement on its website:

The removal of wild horses and burros from public rangelands is carried out to ensure rangeland health, in accordance with land-use plans that are developed in an open, public process. These land-use plans are the means by which the BLM carries out its core mission, which is to manage the land for multiple uses while protecting the land's resources. Authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed land has declined by nearly 50 percent since the 1940s; actual livestock grazing on public rangelands is even less than what is authorized because of such factors as drought, wildfire, and climate change impacts.

Salazar's plan will require authorization from Congress before it can be put into action. For more information, read the BLM's Q&A on the topic.