

Youth Forum

Wild Horses: Legends or Burdens on Our Rangelands?

**Reducing wild horse herd numbers with the proper
management tools can improve rangeland health**

by Morgan L. Russell

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*He's desert bred, he's underfed, and tough as
pinon tree.*

*No cowboy pals or pole corrals, just wild and run-
nin' free.*

*No thing of beauty, most would say, but beauty's
hidden there.*

*It's in the blood of a rangy stud, and in the heart
of a mustang mare.*

This romantic image of horses that poet Robert Wagoner paints for us has been an icon of American Western culture for nearly 2 centuries. Through art, literature, and film, wild horses have come to represent the spirit of the American West. Today, the wild horse is more about controversy than romance. As a high-impact species competing with other users on public ranges, mustangs are at the forefront of the debate on managing public lands.

Wild horse herds are descendants of ancestors introduced into North America by early Spanish explorers in the late 1500s. During the 1700s, natives, miners, and the US Cavalry began abandoning their horses onto public lands. Because there were no known natural predators for these feral animals, overpopulation was inevitable. In the early 1930s, ranchers began eradicating the wild horse by any means possible. The removal of these unwanted guests continued into the late 1960s when Velma Johnson, aka

"Wild Horse Annie," spearheaded a campaign to draw attention to the inhumane actions inflicted on the wild horses. The public embraced her plea, and the "The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971" (Public Law 92-195) was established. This law gave stewardship of wild horse herds to the federal government. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the US Forest Service were asked to administer the future of wild horses on public lands.

Today, 270 herds, totaling 43,750 wild horses, roam in 10 western states and are managed by the BLM. In 2003, rangeland vegetation growth was 29% below normal forage production. This statistic becomes even more dramatic when you factor in that the western ranges have been affected by drought for the past 6 years. In the Dixie National Forest, grazing permittees were forced to reduce the number of cows on summer range by half because the herds of wild horses were not sufficiently reduced and thus resources for sustaining the cattle and large game were limited. Agencies held emergency wild horse roundups in regions where drought had been the most severe. Horses were gathered and placed in sanctuaries or holding corrals until further options became available. Without this intervention, many of the herds would have perished and the ranges would have been stripped of many native grass species.

Michael Smith (2002) states, "... that heavy wild horse grazing can result in land dominated by unpalatable shrubs, since grasses are the most widely used forage by horses" (online position statement). Smith also believes "... that management must in-

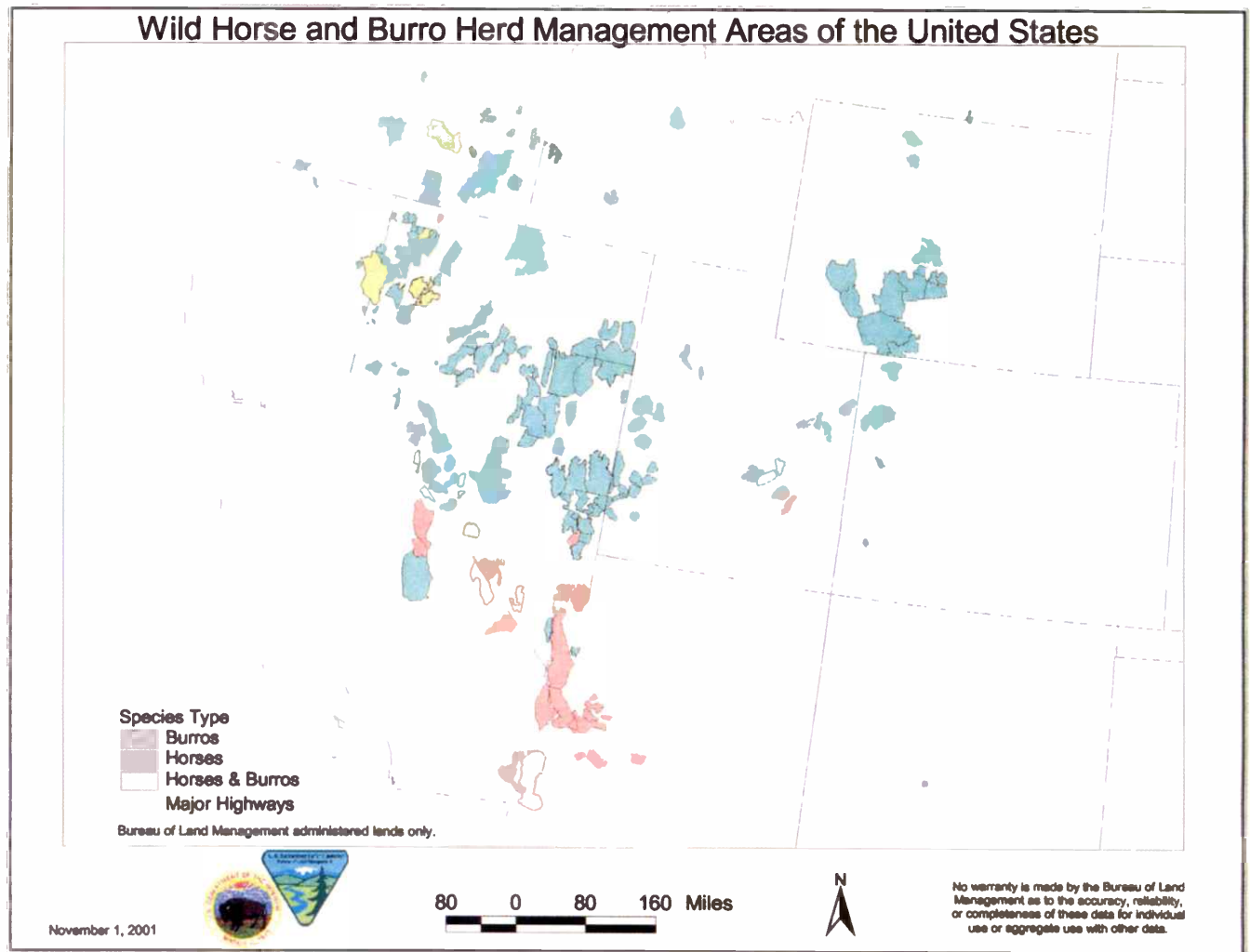


Figure 1. Wild horse and burro herd management areas of the United States.



Figure 2. My family, including Reno, our 11-year-old adopted wild horse and palomino quarter horse, Buster.

tervene or the ecological conditions of the range will be irreversible.”

The primary objective of the BLM is to protect the vitality of public lands and manage wild horses, permittee users, and other interest groups. The BLM is bound by the Act of 1971 to manage wild horses in a humane way and to implement methods that keep herds at manageable numbers.

Two methods that are sensitive to the diversity of each herd and the hierarchy within the herd family are currently being implemented to reduce the number of wild horses on public lands. These methods include: private adoption and placing the horses in sanctuaries funded by the government and private sponsors. The BLM annually receives tax monies of \$9.6 million to carry out these management prac-

tices and to comply with the Act of 1971. This computes to an average cost of \$1,100 per horse that is processed for adoption and \$430 for each horse placed into a sanctuary.

My family adopted a yearling mustang colt 10 years ago. Today, Reno is no longer a horse but a family member. I have shown him in English and Western competitions, roped off him, "queened" on him, and packed deer out on him. Reno is more than a mustang to the Russell family; he is a dependable friend we have come to love and cherish. Even though our experience is somewhat like a fairy tale, some people can have experiences that are quite the contrary. Wild horses are often adopted by untrained owners who are hoping to own a part of the Wild West, when in reality they are getting more wild than west.

The BLM is considering suspending private adoptions and placing all surplus horses into sanctuaries. Although the initial cost to the taxpayer is substantially lower than processing the horses for public adoption, the care and management of the sanctuaries for the life of the horse remains an issue. Sanctuaries and public adoptions are simply a Band-Aid to the management dilemma facing the BLM.

Today, range scientists are considering a new method of controlling the fertility rate in mustang mares. This method of birth control is a time-released injection that suppresses the normal cycle of the mare for up to 1 year. At this time, the costs of capturing, handling, and administering the drug annually, do not outweigh the benefits. However, new

developments in research have recently shown that a new fertility drug has the potential to inhibit the estrous cycle of treated mares for up to 5 years, making this form of birth control more attractive as a management tool. It will take several years after the drug is implanted to see the effects of this method. Until then, the plight and future of wild horses lies in the stewardship of our government.

The wild horse is both the icon that is depicted in the poetry of Robert Wagoner and a continual burden facing the managers of our rangelands. The BLM is establishing science and technology teams to aggressively access rangeland health and determine appropriate herd management levels. Although the wild horse contributes to the deterioration of soil and plant quality, high impact on riparian areas, and a decrease in biodiversity, it still remains a protected component of our western rangelands. Wild horses can continue their legacy as a symbol of the west as long as numbers are kept in check and more effective management practices are implemented.

References

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The author is a 2004 graduate of Dixie High School in St. George, Utah. She will attend University of North Texas this fall and major in public relations/communications. She would like to thank her parents, Randy and Debbie Russell, for instilling a love of livestock and rangelands.