



Mule Deer Working Group **Fact Sheet**

MULE DEER AND WILD/FERAL HORSES AND BURROS

Fact Sheet #29

OVERVIEW

Horses and burros managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) are classified as “wild.” Horses and burros that exist on lands managed by other Federal, state, tribal, or other jurisdictions are considered “feral.” Both wild and feral horses and burros are considered here. Current numbers of wild horses and burros on BLM and USFS lands exceed their established Appropriate Management Levels (AML) by more than 300%. This is unsustainable and does not conform to the goal of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (Act) to achieve and maintain a “thriving natural ecological balance.” If the exponential population growth rates of both wild and feral horses and burros continue, it will likely result in a disastrous collapse of forage and water resources within fragile desert and sagebrush environments and associated native fish and wildlife populations including mule deer and the horses and burros themselves.



Photo: Brett Blum

BACKGROUND

Over the past three decades mule deer populations have struggled and many have declined, while thriving wild/feral horses and burros continue to increase. It is well-established that mule deer, especially struggling populations, cannot persist with more environmental stressors to contend with. Mule deer and wild/feral horses and burros inhabit many of the same environments from the deserts to the sagebrush steppe to the mountains throughout the West. In some jurisdictions, wild/feral horses and burros have greatly expanded their presence in prime mule deer habitats. Wild/feral horses and burros alter important habitats (some permanently). They also compete directly with mule deer and other wildlife for forage, water, and cover, often defending these resources against use by wildlife. Reducing competition from unregulated wild/feral horse and burro populations would enhance mule deer population health and vigor in the habitats they share.



Photo: Sarah Noelle

ISSUES

The original intent of the Act was to humanely protect free-roaming horses and burros with sound, science-based natural resource management in order to protect the natural ecological balance of all native fish and wildlife and their habitats. Ignoring science and heeding to emotionally-charged opinion is contrary to the intent of the Act. This has resulted in severely degraded natural resources and the inability of some environments (i.e., deserts) to sustain the continually increasing horse and burro populations much less the native wildlife endemic to these areas. In short, wild/feral horses and burros are literally destroying the habitat they and native wildlife depend on. Recently, research has documented wild/feral horses displacing native wildlife (mammals, birds and reptiles) from drinking at critical water sources in the Great Basin Desert.

It is also widely documented that wild/feral horses severely reduce native wildlife species richness and diversity and detrimentally impact sagebrush habitats and associated sage-grouse populations. Sagebrush habitats in these same environments are important to mule deer, particularly during winter.

MANAGING FOR FEWER WILD HORSES AND BURROS

The BLM and USFS are responsible for wild horse and burro management on federally-owned public lands as “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West.” The Act requires management plans to “preserve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple-use relationship in that area and to protect the range from the deterioration associated with overpopulation.”

The National Academy of Sciences in 2013 stated “Evidence suggests that wild horse and burro populations are growing by 15 to 20 percent each year, a level that is unsustainable for maintaining healthy populations as well as healthy ecosystems.” In March 2018, BLM estimated 82,000 wild horses and burros on public rangelands yet the AML is less than 27,000, and nearly an additional 50,000 wild horses and burros are in holding facilities. The cost of BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Program has risen from \$36.2 million in 2008 to \$80.4 million in 2017, with most being spent on care of excess animals in off-range facilities.

The removal of prohibitive budget appropriations language would allow the Wild Horse and Burro Program to be more effective in reducing horse and burro numbers to established AMLs thereby ensuring healthy rangelands and maintenance or restoration of crucial wildlife habitats. It is also important BLM and USFS be given the ability to use all management tools provided by the Act. State wildlife management agencies, other jurisdictions, and wildlife conservation groups must engage at the state and local levels to support the Federal agencies’ efforts to manage horses and burros at their AMLs.



Photo: Sarah Noelle

Photo: Alan Shepherd



Photo: Sarah Noelle

IN SUMMARY

Management of wild/feral horses and burros is a deeply emotional and divisive issue. Animal over-population and excessive use of rangeland resources is at the focus of this national crisis. Today, rangelands throughout much of the West are not capable of sustaining wild/feral horses and burros at their current levels, thus diminishing the value of those habitats for mule deer and other wildlife. As with other resource management issues there is opportunity to balance the concerns and ideologies of people with ecological constraints of the habitats important to mule deer and other wildlife. As a Nation, we must urgently strive to find that balance and permit proper wild/feral horse and burro management.

More information on Mule Deer can be found at www.muledeerworkinggroup.com

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