

Updated October 14, 2020

Wild Horse and Burro Management: Overview of Costs

Background

The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (the 1971 Act, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1331 et seq.) provides for management and protection of wild horses and burros by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM, Department of the Interior) and Forest Service (FS, Department of Agriculture). Federal management of wild horses and burros has generated controversy, proposals for change, and lawsuits for years. Issues for Congress include the adequacy of authorities to achieve the appropriate management level (AML) on the range, effectiveness of agency management, and sufficiency of funding.

Overview of Authority

Under the 1971 Act, BLM and FS are to inventory horse and burro populations periodically to determine AMLs. The agencies are authorized to remove animals exceeding the range's carrying capacity to achieve AML. When the pertinent Secretary determines that an overpopulation exists and that it is necessary to remove excess animals, the law requires the following actions (16 U.S.C. § 1333(b)(2)). First, the Secretary "shall order old, sick, or lame animals to be destroyed in the most humane manner possible." Second, the Secretary is directed to remove healthy animals for private adoption. Third, the Secretary shall cause excess animals "to be destroyed in the most humane and cost efficient manner possible." However, since 1982 the agencies have not used this authority to destroy healthy animals. Most recently, the FY2020 appropriations law (P.L. 116-94, Division D, §419) prohibited the use of funds for destruction of healthy animals and for sales of animals that result in processing into commercial products. Most appropriations laws since FY1988 have contained a similar prohibition on BLM funding.

Over the decades, laws have included additional authorities to reduce excess animals. In 2004, for instance, P.L. 108-447, § 142 authorized animal sales, including to

- direct the agencies to sell, "without limitation," excess animals (or remains) that are more than 10 years old or offered for adoption unsuccessfully at least three times;
- remove a ban on sale of wild horses and burros and their remains for processing into commercial products; and
- remove criminal penalties for processing the remains of a wild horse or burro into commercial products, if it is sold under the new authority.

These changes have been supported by some as providing a cost-effective way of helping achieve AML, improving the health of the animals, protecting range resources, and restoring a natural ecological balance on federal lands. The

changes have been opposed by others as potentially leading to the destruction of healthy animals and limited by agency policies and use of appropriated funds.

Population

Achieving and maintaining the number of wild horses and burros at the national AML has challenged BLM for decades. BLM has set the upper limit for AML for all wild horse and burro herds on its lands at 26,770. As of March 2020, the number of animals on BLM lands significantly exceeded this figure—95,114, or more than triple the AML. BLM manages wild horses and burros in 177 herd management areas (HMAs) in 10 western states. Nearly half of all the HMAs and more than half of the animals are located in Nevada. Five other states each have at least 5,000 animals: California, Wyoming, Arizona, Oregon, and Utah.

Thousands of additional animals—47,845 as of August 2020—are being managed by BLM off-range. They were removed from rangelands exceeding the AML. Most are being cared for in long-term (pasture) holding facilities for the remainder of their lives, although others are being readied for adoption or sale in short-term (corral) facilities.

For FS lands, the AML is roughly 2,300 for 2020. The number of wild horses and burros on FS lands—about 8,400—is more than three times the AML. The animals are on 34 active territories in 7 states, with about two-thirds of them managed jointly with BLM. Given the larger populations on BLM lands, most of the public and congressional focus has been on BLM management.

Wild Horse and Burro Program Costs

Whether funding levels have been appropriate to care for wild horses and burros, reach AML, and reduce long-term budgetary needs has been unclear. Program costs would vary based on the overall management strategy adopted and the particular programs emphasized. For instance, a BLM report to Congress in 2018 presented different options with varying associated costs.

BLM Historical Appropriations: FY2000-FY2020

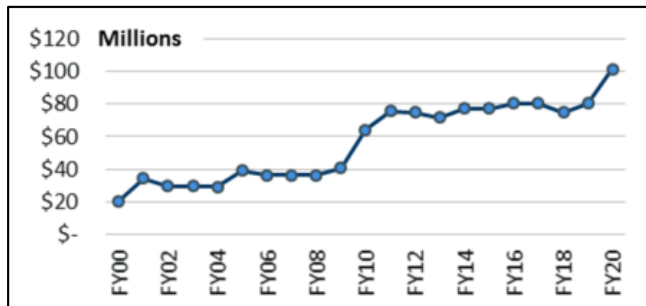
For FY2020, the appropriation for BLM management of wild horses and burros was \$101.6 million, a 26% increase from the FY2019 level (\$80.6 million). FY2020 funding was about 5 times the amount for FY2000 (\$20.4 million) and a 59% increase over FY2010 (\$64.0 million), in nominal dollars. **Figure 1** depicts the annual funding. (FS appropriations are not separately identifiable.)

Since FY2000, appropriations laws periodically have provided BLM with additional funding to achieve AML. For example, BLM received a \$14.1 million (69%) increase to \$34.5 million in FY2001, the largest annual *percentage*

increase. The intent was to achieve AML over several years and, by FY2010, reduce budgetary needs below the FY2001 level. These goals were not fully achieved, although the on-range population declined and AML was nearly reached in 2007. In FY2010, BLM received a \$23.4 million (58%) increase to \$64.0 million, the biggest annual *dollar* increase. The increase was for activities (e.g., removal of animals, population control efforts, and adoptions) to achieve AML by 2013 (although this did not occur), and for the escalating cost of animal care in long-term holding.

Figure 1. BLM Appropriations for Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2000-FY2020

(in millions of current dollars)



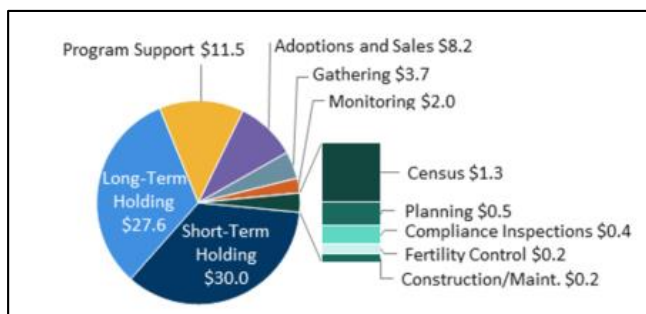
Source: Figure by CRS, with data primarily provided from BLM.

FY2019 Expenditures by Activity

BLM uses wild horse and burro funding for a variety of activities. Expenditures can differ from appropriations in part due to carry-over and transfer of funds. For FY2019, expenditures totaled \$85.5 million. **Figure 2** shows FY2019 expenditures by activity. Off-range holding accounted for \$57.6 million (67%) of total FY2019 expenditures (composed of \$30.0 million (35%) for short-term care and \$27.6 million (32%) for long-term care). The next largest portion, \$11.5 million (13%), was expended for program support and overhead. Placement into private care, through adoptions and sales, was \$8.2 million (10%). Another \$3.7 million (4%) was used for gathering animals on the range, and \$2.0 million (2%) was spent on herd monitoring. The remaining \$2.6 million (3%) was expended for varied purposes (including <1% for fertility control).

Figure 2. Expenditures for BLM Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2019

(in millions of current dollars)



Source: Figure by CRS, with data primarily provided from BLM.

Issues and Proposals Related to Costs

Concerns over increasing wild horse and burro populations and program costs have prompted discussions, studies, and proposals. For instance, in response to congressional direction, in May 2020, BLM issued a report to Congress with actions and funding to achieve AML over 15-18 years. The emphasis is on removals, placement into private care off-range holding, and fertility control, as well as the costs of these actions. In the past, destruction of healthy animals also has been discussed to achieve savings.

One question is how to reduce the average cost of adoption. The cost to place an animal into private ownership generally exceeds the revenue. Per adoption, BLM typically charges a minimum of \$125 per trained animal and \$25 per untrained animal, but the average cost for BLM to adopt (or sell) is approximately \$1,500. This cost includes activities to make the animals more marketable, such as training, advertising, and transporting. It does not include the \$1,000 incentive BLM has paid individuals for each untrained animal they adopt (since March 12, 2019). In any case, the cost of adoptions is considerably less expensive than the lifetime cost of caring for a horse off-range; BLM estimates savings of \$24,000 per animal.

Another question is whether animals can be moved more quickly from short-term corral facilities into long-term pasture facilities to achieve program savings. Long-term holding typically is used for older and other animals with less potential for adoption or sale; the average cost is about \$2 per animal per day. By comparison, the cost of short-term corral facilities is about \$5 per day per animal. Short-term facilities are more expensive due in part to hay costs, veterinary services, and farrier services to prepare the animals for adoption or sale, and in some cases the costs of BLM salaried employees.

A third question is how to improve fertility control to reduce herd sizes and costs. The most common method costs roughly \$2,500 per mare, including gathering, treatment, and short-term holding. Under this treatment, an immunocontraceptive agent—PZP—typically is applied during periodic gathers to remove excess animals from the range. Mares are captured, treated with PZP, and released to the range. PZP generally is most effective for one year only. To lower costs, areas of exploration include longer-lasting fertility control and other options, such as sterilization.

A fourth question is whether BLM should sell excess animals without limitations and/or destroy excess healthy animals to reduce long-term program costs. In past budget proposals (e.g., FY2020 but not FY2021), President Trump called for using all authorities granted under the 1971 Act by removing general agency sale limitations (intended in part as safeguards against slaughter) and congressional prohibitions on using funds to destroy healthy animals. As mentioned above, Congress retained these prohibitions for FY2020. Such proposals have been controversial, rejected by some who oppose destruction or support alternative management methods.

Carol Hardy Vincent, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.