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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 specific 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 “shall cause ... excess ... horses and burros to be humanely captured” for private adoption. Third, the Secretary shall cause excess animals “to be destroyed in the most humane and cost efficient manner possible.”

Over the decades, laws have included additional authorities to reduce excess animals. In 2004, for instance, P.L. 108-447, Section 142, authorized animal sales, including provisions 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 3 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.

Since 1982, the agencies have not used their authority to destroy healthy animals. Most recently, the FY2021 Interior

appropriations law (P.L. 116-260, Division G, §419) prohibited the use of funds for destruction of healthy animals or for sales of animals that result in processing into commercial products. Most appropriations laws since FY1988 have contained similar prohibitions on BLM funding.

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 26,785 animals. As of March 2021, the estimated number of animals on BLM lands was 86,189, more than triple the AML. BLM manages wild horses and burros in 177 herd management areas (HMAs) in 10 western states. Nearly half of the HMAs and more than half of the animals are located in Nevada. Four other states each have at least 5,000 animals: California, Wyoming, Arizona, and Oregon.

Thousands of additional animals—50,030 as of June 2021—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 2,400 for 2021. The number of wild horses and burros on FS lands—about 10,700—is more than four times the AML. The animals are on 34 active territories in seven states, with about two dozen 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 Funding

It is unclear whether funding levels have been appropriate to care for wild horses and burros. Program costs would vary based on the overall management strategy adopted and the particular programs emphasized (e.g., off-range holding, adoption, or population control). For instance, a 2018 BLM report to Congress presented different options for wild horse and burro management with varying associated costs.

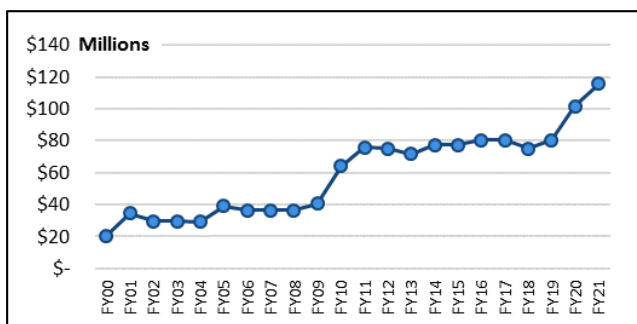
BLM Historical Appropriations: FY2000-FY2021

For FY2021, the appropriation for BLM management of wild horses and burros was \$115.7 million, a 14% increase from the FY2020 level (\$101.6 million). FY2021 funding was more than five times the amount for FY2000 (\$20.4 million) and an 81% increase over FY2010 (\$64.0 million), in nominal dollars. **Figure 1** depicts BLM’s annual funding. (FS appropriations are not separately identifiable.)

Since FY2000, appropriations laws have periodically 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, to 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, 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-FY2021

(in millions of current dollars)



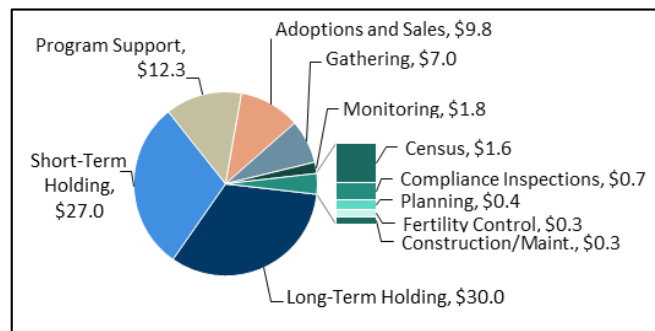
Source: CRS; data from BLM and appropriations documents.

FY2020 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 FY2020, expenditures totaled \$91.2 million. **Figure 2** shows FY2020 expenditures by activity. Off-range holding accounted for \$57.0 million (62%) of expenditures, composed of \$30.0 million for long-term care and \$27.0 million for short-term care. The next-largest portion, \$12.3 million (13%), was expended for program support and overhead. Placement into private care, through adoptions and sales, was \$9.8 million (11%). Another \$7.0 million (8%) was used for gathering animals on the range. The remaining \$5.1 million (6%) was expended for varied purposes (including <1% for fertility control).

Figure 2. Expenditures for BLM Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2020

(in millions of current dollars)



Source: CRS; data from BLM and appropriations documents.

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, BLM issued a report in May 2020 proposing actions and funding to achieve AML over 15-18 years. The report’s emphasis is on animal removals, placement into private care, off-range holding, and fertility control and includes costs of these actions. In the past, destruction of healthy animals also has been discussed to achieve savings.

One funding 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 complete an adoption (or sale) 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 than the lifetime cost of off-range care; BLM estimated 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, to 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 some past budget proposals (e.g., FY2020), 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

FY2021. Such proposals have been controversial and have been rejected by some who oppose destruction or support alternative management methods.

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