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Wild Horse and Burro Management: Overview of Costs

Background

The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 (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), within the Department of the Interior, and the Forest Service (FS), within the Department of Agriculture. For decades, federal management of wild horses and burros in western states has generated controversy, study, proposals, and lawsuits on occasion. BLM and FS use several approaches to achieve the *appropriate management level* (AML) of animals on the range, including placement into private care (primarily adoption and sale), off-range holding, and fertility control, among others. Management costs have increased over time (Figure 1). Issues for Congress include the adequacy and use of funding to achieve AML, primarily on BLM lands.

Overview of Authority

Under the 1971 Act, BLM and FS inventory horse and burro populations periodically to determine AML for each herd. 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, where there is no adoption demand, the Secretary shall cause excess animals “to be destroyed in the most humane and cost efficient manner possible.”

Congress has enacted additional authorities to reduce excess animals. For instance, P.L. 108-447, Division E, Section 142, authorized excess animal sales, with provisions to (1) 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; (2) remove a ban on sale of wild horses and burros (and remains) for processing into commercial products; and (3) remove criminal penalties for processing the remains of a sold animal into commercial products.

Since 1982, BLM and FS have not used their authority to destroy healthy animals. Further, most (but not all) annual Interior appropriations laws over the past few decades have prohibited BLM from using funds therein for destruction of healthy animals or for sales of animals that result in processing into commercial products. Since FY2020, Interior appropriations laws typically contained a similar FS provision (e.g., P.L. 118-42, Division E, §417(e)).

Population

Achieving and maintaining the number of wild horses and burros at the national AML has challenged BLM for

decades. As of March 1, 2025, BLM had set the AML upper limit for all wild horse and burro herds on its lands at 25,556 animals, but the on-range estimate was 73,130 animals. However, this level is 23% less than the 2020 recent high of 95,114 animals, due to factors including increased removals, adoptions/sales, and fertility control.

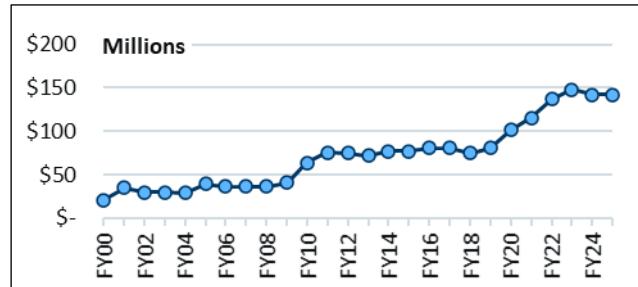
BLM manages wild horses and burros in 175 herd management areas (HMAs) in 10 western states. Nearly half (83) of the HMAs are in Nevada. Wyoming, Oregon, Utah, and California each have between 14 and 21 HMAs. BLM also manages thousands of these animals—64,205 as of August 2025—off range. During periodic gathers and removals, these additional animals were removed from rangelands exceeding AML. Most (61%) are being cared for in long-term (pasture) facilities, typically for the remainder of their lives. Others (39%) are in short-term (corral) facilities, usually to be readied for adoption or sale. For FS lands, AML is roughly 3,500 (January 2025). The number on range—about 9,000-9,500—is more than double the AML. The animals are on 34 active territories in several states, with about two dozen managed jointly with BLM.

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, 2018 and 2020 BLM reports (and a 2020 fact sheet) presented management options with varying associated costs.

Figure 1. BLM Appropriations for Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2000-FY2025

(in millions of nominal dollars)



Sources: CRS; data from BLM and appropriations documents.

BLM Historical Appropriations: FY2000-FY2025

The FY2025 appropriation for BLM management of wild horses and burros was \$142.0 million. Relative to FY2000 (\$20.4 million), this was nearly a 600% increase in nominal dollars and about a 270% increase in 2025 dollars. The FY2025 appropriation also was about 4% less than the

FY2023 peak of \$147.9 million in nominal dollars and about 9% less in 2025 dollars (**Figure 1**). FS wild horse and burro appropriations are not separately identifiable.

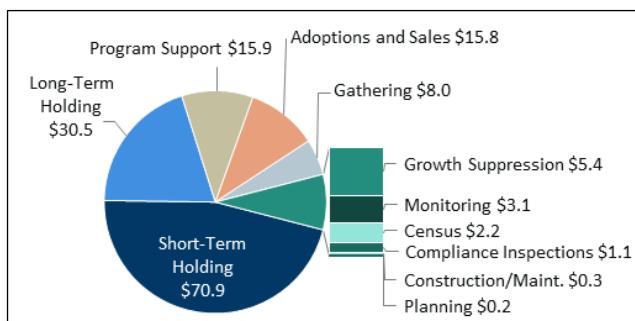
Since FY2000, appropriations laws periodically have provided BLM funding to reduce animals on the range. For example, in FY2010, BLM received \$64.0 million, compared with \$40.6 million in FY2009. The increase was for activities (e.g., removal and adoption of animals, population control) to achieve AML by 2013 (which did not occur) and for the escalating cost of long-term holding. As another example, the FY2022 appropriation was \$137.1 million, compared with \$115.7 million in FY2021, to support “an aggressive, non-lethal population control strategy” as set out in BLM’s 2020 report, according to the explanatory statement. This strategy was to include increased removals, long-term holding, and fertility control.

FY2024 Obligations by Activity

Figure 2 shows FY2024 BLM obligations of wild horse and burro funding of \$153.3 million, by activity. Off-range holding accounted for \$101.4 million (66%), composed of \$70.9 million (46%) for short-term care and \$30.5 million (20%) for long-term care. Program support and adoptions and sales were each 10%. Other portions were 5% for gathering (animals on the range), 4% for growth suppression, and 5% for other activities.

Figure 2. Obligations for BLM Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2024

(in millions of dollars)



Sources: CRS; data from BLM and appropriations documents.

Notes: Obligations can differ from appropriations. Amounts sum to \$153.4 million due to rounding.

Issues and Proposals Related to Costs

Concerns over increasing wild horse and burro populations and program costs have prompted studies and proposals for years. In response to congressional direction, BLM issued a report in 2020 proposing actions to achieve AML over 15-18 years. The emphasis was on animal removals, off-range holding, placement into private care, and fertility control and included related costs. Some Appropriations Committee reports have expressed an intent to fund options in BLM’s 2020 report.

Some questions pertain to how to increase the number, and reduce the average cost, of animals placed in private care. BLM has sought to increase adoptions and sales by partnering with organizations (including new partnerships). BLM typically charges a minimum of \$25 to adopt or purchase an untrained animal and \$125 per trained animal,

but BLM estimated the average cost to the agency at about \$1,700 in 2025. This cost includes making the animals more marketable (e.g., by training, advertising, and transporting) but excludes a \$1,000 adoption incentive that ended in March 2025. The cost of placement in private care is considerably less than BLM’s average lifetime cost of caring for an animal—about \$15,000 in 2025. This was a decrease from \$27,500 in 2023, according to BLM, due to the acquisition of additional long-term pasture facilities, which are lower cost than short-term corral facilities.

However, the number of animals in short-term facilities has increased (e.g., by 54% from 16,325 in 2021 to 25,110 in 2025). 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, with an average cost in 2025 at about \$2.35 per animal per day, according to BLM. The cost of short-term corral facilities was about \$6 per animal per day in 2025. 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—how to improve fertility control to reduce herd sizes and costs—has been a focus of BLM research and was recommended by BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board. BLM estimated the cost of the most common method—Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) vaccines—at \$2,100 per mare in 2025, including gathering, treating with PZP, holding for a short time, and then releasing back to the range. PZP generally is most effective for one year only. To lower costs, areas of research have included longer-lasting fertility control. Since 2018, BLM has increased use of the GonaCon-Equine vaccine, which can produce four or more years of infertility in mares receiving a booster dose. The cost of this treatment was about \$2,500 per mare in 2025, including the vaccine; application by dart or gather/treat/hold/release; and staff travel and labor.

A fourth question is how to increase nonfederal funding for management of wild horses and burros. Recent initiatives include BLM establishment of a “micro-donations website.” Also, the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board has recommended that the Foundation for America’s Public Lands, BLM’s official charitable partner, serve as a funding source/mechanism for off-range holding.

A fifth question is whether BLM should sell excess animals without limitations and/or destroy excess healthy animals to reduce program costs, as some observers have proposed. President Trump’s FY2026 budget did not prohibit use of funds for destruction of animals. Also, the FY2020 BLM budget justification had called for availability of all authorities under the 1971 Act by removing sale limitations (intended as safeguards against slaughter) and prohibitions on using funds to destroy healthy animals. The FY2020 appropriations law retained these provisions.

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