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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) and Forest Service (FS). 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 the AMLs. 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, §142, authorized 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 3 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 wild horse or burro into commercial products. Some support these changes as providing a cost-effective way of helping achieve the AML, improving animal health, protecting range resources, and restoring a natural ecological balance on federal lands. Others oppose these changes as potentially leading to the destruction of healthy animals and as 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 FY2022 Interior appropriations law (P.L. 117-103, Division G, §417(e)) 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 for BLM.

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 the AML for all wild horse and burro herds on its lands at 26,785 animals. As of March 2022, there were an estimated 82,384 animals on BLM lands—more than triple the current AML—and more than double the 40,605 on-range estimate from 2013. However, the 2022 on-range estimate is 13% less than the 2020 high of 95,114 animals, due to increased removals and fertility control, as well as other factors.

BLM manages wild horses and burros in 177 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 16 and 21 HMAs.

BLM manages thousands of additional animals—58,314 as of May 2022—off range. These animals 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 (in 2022). The number of wild horses and burros on FS lands—about 11,460—is more than four times the AML. The animals are on 34 active territories in seven states, with about two dozen managed jointly with BLM. Most of the public and congressional focus has been on BLM management, given the larger populations on BLM lands.

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.

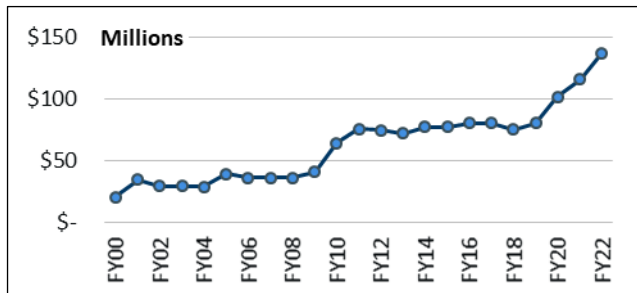
BLM Historical Appropriations: FY2000-FY2022

For FY2022, the appropriation for BLM management of wild horses and burros was \$137.1 million, 18% higher than FY2021 (\$115.7 million). The increase was intended to support “an aggressive, non-lethal population control strategy” as set out in a May 2020 BLM report, according to the explanatory statement on the FY2022 appropriations law. This strategy includes increased removals, long-term holding, and fertility control. FY2022 funding was more than six times the FY2000 amount (\$20.4 million) and more than double the FY2010 amount (\$64.0 million), in nominal dollars. **Figure 1** depicts BLM’s annual funding. (FS appropriations are not separately identifiable.)

Since FY2000, appropriations laws periodically have provided BLM with additional funding to achieve the AML. For example, 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 the 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-FY2022

(in millions of current dollars)



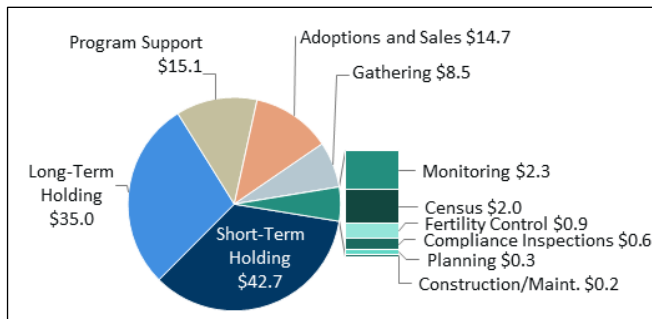
Source: CRS; data from BLM and appropriations documents.

FY2021 Expenditures by Activity

BLM uses wild horse and burro funding for a variety of activities. Expenditures can differ from appropriations in part due to carryover and transfer of funds. For FY2021, expenditures totaled \$122.2 million. **Figure 2** shows FY2021 expenditures by activity. Off-range holding accounted for \$77.7 million (64%) of expenditures, composed of \$35.0 million for long-term care and \$42.7 million for short-term care. The next-largest portion, \$15.1 million (12%), was expended for program support and overhead. Placement into private care, through adoptions and sales, was \$14.7 million (12%). Another \$8.5 million (7%) was used for gathering animals on the range. The remaining \$6.2 million (5%) was expended for varied purposes (including <1% for fertility control).

Figure 2. Expenditures for BLM Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2021

(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 the AML over 15-18 years. The report’s emphasis is on animal removals, off-range holding, placement into private care, 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 placing an animal into private ownership. That cost 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) was estimated in 2020 at about \$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). The cost of adoptions was considerably less than the lifetime cost of off-range care; in 2020, 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 was estimated in 2020 at about \$2 per animal per day. By comparison, the cost of short-term corral facilities was about \$5 per animal per day. 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 was estimated (in 2020) to cost roughly \$2,500 per mare, including gathering, treatment, and short-term holding. Under this treatment, an immunocontraceptive agent—Porcine Zona Pellucida (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 have included longer-lasting fertility control and 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. For instance, as recently as FY2020, the BLM budget justification 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 FY2022. Such proposals have been controversial and have been rejected by some who oppose destruction or support alternative management methods.

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