

December 31, 2018

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 on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service (FS) lands. Federal management of wild horses and burros has generated controversy, proposals for change, and lawsuits for years. Issues for Congress have included the adequacy of authorities to achieve the appropriate management level (AML) on the range, the effectiveness of agency management, and sufficiency of funding.

Overview of Authority

Under the 1971 Act, BLM and FS are to periodically inventory horse and burro populations 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 to be taken (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, and for FY2018, and most of the past 30 years, appropriations laws have prohibited use of BLM funds to do so.

Over the decades, Congress has provided additional authorities to reduce excess wild horses and burros. In 2004, for instance, 1971 Act amendments (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.

Population

Achieving and maintaining the number of wild horses and burros at the national AML has challenged BLM for decades. As of March 1, 2018, BLM had set the upper limit for AML for all wild horse and burro herds on its lands at 26,690. The number of animals on BLM lands significantly exceeded this figure—81,951, 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. Four other states each have at least 5,000 animals: California, Wyoming, Arizona, and Utah.

Thousands of additional animals—50,873 as of November 2018—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 was roughly 2,300 for 2018. The number of animals on FS lands—9,300—was approximately 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 horse and burro 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. Because FS appropriations for wild horse and burro management are not separately identifiable, this analysis focuses on BLM appropriations.

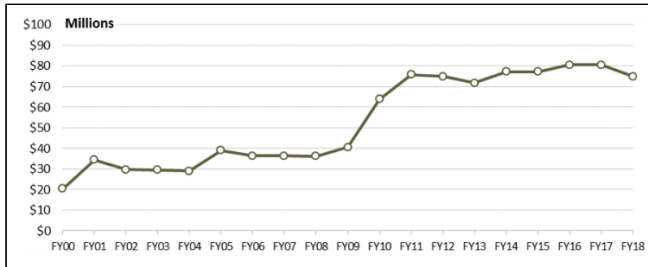
BLM Historical Appropriations: FY2000-FY2018

For FY2018, the appropriation for BLM management of wild horses and burros was \$75.0 million, a reduction from the FY2017 level (\$80.6 million). FY2018 funding was nearly quadruple the amount for FY2000 (\$20.4 million) and nearly double the amount for FY2009 (\$40.6 million), in nominal dollars. **Figure 1** depicts the annual funding.

Since FY2000, Congress has periodically provided BLM with additional resources 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 facilities.

Figure 1. BLM Appropriations for Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2000-FY2018
(in millions of current dollars)

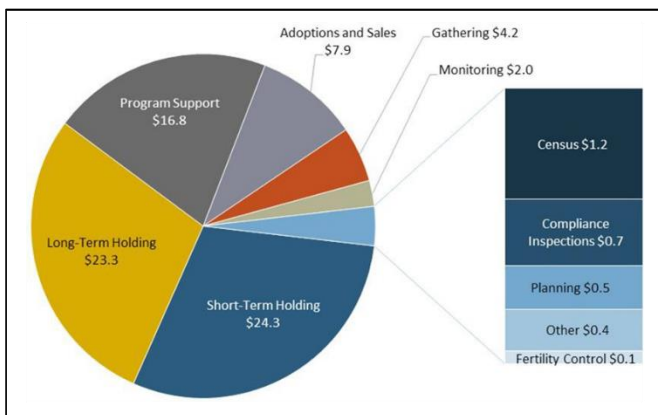


Source: Figure by CRS, with data primarily provided from BLM.

FY2017 Expenditures by Activity

BLM uses funds for wild horse and burro management on a variety of activities. Expenditures can differ from appropriations in part due to carry-over and transfer of funds. For FY2017, expenditures totaled \$81.5 million. **Figure 2** shows FY2017 expenditures by activity. Off-range holding accounted for \$47.5 million (58%) of total FY2017 expenditures, composed of \$24.3 million (30%) for short-term care and \$23.3 million (29%) for long-term care. The next largest portion of funds, \$16.8 million (21%), was expended for program support and overhead. Placement into private care, through adoptions and sales, was \$7.9 million (10%) of the budget. Another \$4.2 million (5%) of the monies was used for gathering animals on the range, with another \$2.0 million (2%) for herd monitoring. The remaining \$3.0 million (4%) was used for varied purposes.

Figure 2. Expenditures for BLM Wild Horse and Burro Management, FY2017
(in millions of current dollars)



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

Issues and Proposals Related to Costs

Concerns over increasing program costs have prompted discussions on how to better manage wild horses and burros

and proposals to achieve savings. Costs associated with various programs/activities, including adoption, holding, fertility control, sale, and destruction are of particular focus, as well as questions associated with each program/activity.

One question is how to reduce the average cost of adoption. The cost to place an animal into private ownership generally exceeds the revenue. BLM typically receives \$125 per horse for adoption, but the average cost for the BLM to adopt (or sell) an animal was \$1,931 in FY2017. This cost includes activities to make the animals more marketable, such as training, advertising, and transporting to the East Coast. However, adoptions are considerably less expensive than the lifetime cost of caring for a horse off-range. BLM estimated the lifetime cost in a short-term facility at nearly \$50,000, although most off-range animals are cared for in less costly long-term pasture facilities.

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 is typically used for older and other animals with less potential for adoption or sale; the average cost was less than \$2 per animal per day in 2017. By comparison, the cost of short-term corral facilities was more than \$5 per day per animal in 2017. 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. In 2016, the Department of the Interior Office of Inspector General (OIG) determined that BLM had not been maximizing the cost effectiveness of long-term pasture facilities. Some older animals were held in short-term holding despite their low chance of adoption, and with stays up to 5 years despite the 120 day estimate needed to transition animals from the range. Further transporting animals to long-term facilities by the “full truckload” would cut costs, according to the OIG.

A third question is how to improve fertility control to reduce herd sizes and costs. The most common method costs roughly \$3,000 per animal, including costs of the vaccine (approximately \$300 to \$500 per dose) and gathering, holding, feeding, injecting, and releasing the animal back to the range. Under this treatment, an immunocontraceptive agent—PZP-22—is typically applied during periodic gathers to remove excess animals from the range. Mares are captured, treated with PZP-22, and released to the range.

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, in annual budget requests, 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. Such proposals have been controversial, rejected by some horse advocates and others who oppose destruction or support alternative management methods. They have not been generally adopted.

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