



Managing Excess Feral Horses in the Inland Northwest

The Problem

Free-roaming horses have been a part of the landscape in Idaho and central and eastern Oregon and Washington since the Spanish brought the species to what is now the United States. However, because the rangeland areas where these animals now roam are home to almost no apex predators and no viable market exists for selling them, the horse population has skyrocketed. Feral horses—and unwanted domestic horses being dumped in the country due to the economic meltdown—are now destroying rangeland forage needed to feed livestock and wildlife and to retain soil in place. They are also eating special plants of spiritual and nutritional significance to the local tribes. Runoff is dumping topsoil into streams, leading to degradation of the aquatic habitat for salmon and steelhead. Forage consumption by feral horses is also threatening the survival of our other traditional foods, such as deer, elk, bighorn sheep, and sage grouse. Something must be done to reduce the number of wild horses grazing in the Northwest, and fast.

The resident adult horse population in the three-State area is above 20,000 animals, and the annual foal crop raises that number by 20 percent every year.

The recent closure of horse-processing facilities in Texas and Illinois has had a far-reaching effect on the horse industry throughout the country. Without the slaughter option, the horse market has been flooded, the prices for all horses have dropped dramatically, and the livelihood of horse ranchers—tribal and otherwise—has been severely jeopardized. A collateral economic effect of the glut of horses is the devastating impact their populations are making on the environment. Forage depredation is only part of the picture. Plants important in tribal spiritual practices and medicine are being destroyed. Vegetation needed for big and small game has disappeared. Streams important to sport and Indian subsistence fisheries are degraded by silty topsoil rolling off denuded slopes.

Who Wants To Work on the Problem?

Five affected tribes—the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Confederated Tribes of the Colville, and the Shoshone Bannock Nation—have joined together to create the Northwest Tribal Horse Coalition (NTHC) so that they have a voice in how to mitigate the problem.

The U.S. Department of the Interior's (DOI) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has primary legal responsibility for managing the involved Indian Reservation rangeland as part of its trust responsibility for trust lands.

Several other Federal Government agencies are also working with the NTHC. These include DOI's Bureau of Land Management and three agencies from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), which has legal responsibility for ensuring the safe transport of horses to slaughter; the Farm Service Agency (FSA); and the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which works to

ensure that U.S. facilities processing animals for human consumption do so under its standards for cleanliness and humane treatment.

How Can the Problem Be Solved?

The basic options include

- Sale or adoption of the excess horses
- Birth control by injectable vaccine
- Surgical sterilization (castration of stallions)
- Humane processing in a purpose-built facility

What Is Blocking the Initiation of These Solutions?

Two factors stand in the way of selling the animals: the recession and the very low prices U.S. horses are bringing at Canadian or Mexican slaughter facilities. The BLM already takes care of more than 30,000 such horses and burros at its adoption facilities and cannot accept any more. BLM is spending \$28 million a year to take care of these animals! In light of the glut of horses already owned by BLM that they are trying to get adopted – without much success – it is unrealistic to suggest there is a market for the adoption of our surplus horses.

Although there are two birth-control vaccines applicable to horses, only one is now registered and it protects mares against pregnancy for just one year. Recapture and reinjection would be an annual struggle and far too expensive over the long haul.

Castration could make a meaningful contribution to lowering the number of horses in the population, over time. Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation have been testing the viability of horse castration. The Tribe castrated 35 stallions in 2008 and 17 stallions in 2009 as a test. However it's still unclear as to the magnitude of beneficial effects to rangeland resources as castrated adult horses continue to graze on rangeland grasses undiminished. Since this species is long lived, the population reduction from sterilization would be a slow decrease as animals died off naturally over two+ decades. This method, alone, would not yield the needed short-term and sustainable increase in forage or the reduction in silty runoff, which is presently spoiling salmon spawning streams.

When Congress passed an amendment in 2007 that forbade USDA's FSIS from spending taxpayer money to fund antemortem inspection of horses going into the human food chain at American processing plants, the three remaining plants in the United States promptly shut down. The price for slaughter horses dropped sharply, and owners of such animals can now barely afford to ship them to Canada or Mexico for slaughter.

What Solution Does the NTHC Propose?

The NTHC believes that it is necessary to reduce the population of today's feral horses in order to rebalance the ecosystem, protect tribally significant plants, allow rangeland to recover from the animals' annual depredation, and let the natural grasses and forbs of the area recover their hold over the topsoil to prevent excessive runoff.

Sterilization, sale/adoption, and even birth control may play roles in the population-control activities of the affected tribes. But outright population reduction is the only solution that can benefit rangeland recovery quickly enough by itself.

What Does the NTHC Want Congress To Do To Help?

First, do not vote for the proposed bill HR 503 or its equivalent on the Senate side, SB 727. These bills would make anyone slaughtering horses in this country a criminal. Second, revisit the 2009 Omnibus Appropriations

Act, which prohibits funding ante-mortem horse inspection with Federal dollars. It is important the members of Congress recognize that Indian tribes are sovereign units of governments and the United States Congress and the Federal courts have repeatedly recognized that fact. The Congress should therefore not be dictating what we can or cannot do to address these problems within our homelands over which we have jurisdiction.

Several States (Montana, North Dakota, Colorado, and Tennessee) are already looking into the feasibility of building and operating horse-processing plants. The recognition of this problem is by no means restricted to Native American interests.

The Northwestern Tribes Agree: Horse-Processing Facilities Are Needed Now.

We will be undertaking a study for a processing facility where captured feral horses could be processed humanely, following Native American protocols as well as FSIS's rules. The goal would be to package and ship the meat to other countries where the local culture already favors human consumption of horsemeat. USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service will help the NTHC tribes build this foreign market for the processed meat. Other markets, including zoos that can use horsemeat in this country to feed their big carnivores, will be explored as well.

The Office of General Counsel at USDA's FSIS has studied this issue and concluded that it is, indeed, legal for a federally recognized tribe—as a sovereign entity—to build and operate a horse-processing facility. In addition, FSIS is empowered to train tribal inspectors to bring them up to the FSIS level of quality so that inspections done at future tribal processing facility would be just as good as those done at thousands of FSIS-inspected facilities off the reservation every day.

How to Find Out More

The NTHC will be happy to answer any questions you have by telephone or e-mail. Please contact any of the following individuals for more details:

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