

Government roundups of wild horses in the Western U.S. cause controversy

# BORN TO BE WILD?

**W**ild horses gallop through a Nevada desert, raising clouds of dust behind them. A helicopter flies overhead. Its pilot maneuvers the chopper right, then left, herding the wild horses, called *mustangs*, toward an enclosure. Then an assistant on the ground releases a trained horse, which runs into a roped-off area—leading the mustangs in.

The roundup is part of the government's effort to manage wild horses on federal owned rangelands. If there are more horses than the land can support, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) rounds some of them up and removes them.

Captured horses that are 5 years old or younger are offered for sale to the public. Some end up on farms or at 4-H clubs. Older horses go to pastures in the Midwest to live out the rest of their lives.

In recent years, however, helicopter roundups have come under fire from some people who think the practice is inhumane and that mustangs should be left to roam public ranges.

## MUSTANG HISTORY

Spanish settlers introduced horses to North America in 1493. By the late 1800s, the wild

horse population had grown significantly. But as livestock production grew across the West, ranchers didn't want wild horses grazing on the same land. Many were captured by "mustangers" who sold their meat for dog food and human consumption, and their population declined.

In 1971, Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act. This act charged the BLM with protecting and managing mustangs and burros on public land.

Today, in the high deserts of Nevada and surrounding states

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Should helicopter-driven roundups continue? Cite three statements from the article to support your answer.

like Arizona, Utah, and California, 37,300 mustangs roam 27 million acres of federally owned ranges. “BLM-managed lands can sustain only around 26,500 horses and burros,” says Tom Gorey, of the BLM. “There are nearly 11,000 more on the range than there should be to maintain a thriving ecological balance.”

In the past, natural predators like wolves and mountain lions helped control the population of wild horses. But between today’s lack of predators and federal protection, the number of mustangs can double every four years—far beyond the land’s capacity to support them.

## CONTROL METHODS

Roundups are one way the BLM keeps mustang populations at levels that the land can support. The agency also works with the Humane Society of the United States to administer a vaccine called PZP-22, which prevents female mustangs from getting pregnant for 22 months. After that time, the horses have to be recaptured and vaccinated again. But because their ranges are so vast, recapturing the wild horses is challenging.

“If we had longer-lasting agents to make *mares* [female horses] infertile for four or five years, we’d be able to use the vaccine more effectively,” says Gorey.

Since a better vaccine doesn’t currently exist, the BLM says roundups are necessary, though they’re not without some risk.

## A DEBATE RAGES

According to the BLM, in 2011, 99 horses—about 1 percent of those captured—died because of injuries

or accidents that occurred during roundups. Despite the risks involved, the agency considers it important to periodically remove mustangs to prevent destruction of the land.

Some people disagree that mustangs are the ones grazing too much. “The number of cattle roaming the Western ranch far exceeds the horses,” says J.E. de Steiguer, an economist at the University of Arizona.

At the urging of conservationists, ranchers, and the BLM, the National Academy of Sciences is conducting

an independent evaluation of the wild horse program. De Steiguer and others are looking forward to hearing its recommendations, which are due out early this summer.

“On one hand, ranchers and game hunters in the West want these animals completely done away with,” says de Steiguer. “On the other hand, the wild horse preservation activists don’t want them interfered with. The answer, to me, lies somewhere in the middle.” ❁

—Sara Goudarzi



**MARCHING FOR MUSTANGS:** Protesters attend a rally in Washington, D.C., in support of wild horses.



**POPULATION CONTROL:** A worker uses a dart gun to administer a vaccine that prevents female mustangs from becoming pregnant for 22 months.