

Lawsuit claims new policy will increase wild horse slaughter

New guidance on sale of wild horses enacted this year

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

An animal advocacy group has filed a lawsuit accusing the U.S. Bureau of Land Management of subverting a federal prohibition against selling wild horses for slaughter.

Friends of Animals, a nonprofit, claims the agency's 2018 guidance for the sale of wild horses and burros weakens protections for the animals in violation of administrative law.

The complaint alleges the new policy "seems to suggest that BLM employees should turn a blind eye towards buyers who want wild horses for resale to slaughter houses."

The BLM does not comment on pending litigation, but the new guidance is simply intended to ease the process of selling horses to partners like the Mustang Heritage Foundation, which train multiple hors-



BLM A nonprofit is challenging the Bureau of Land Management's new guidance for selling wild horses.

es for later adoption, said Debbie Collins, outreach specialist for the agency's wild horse and burro program.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke does not support the sale for slaughter of healthy wild horses or burros and buyers must attest the animals aren't intended for this outcome, she said.

"There's been nothing changed to direct anyone to do less review of applications," Collins said.

While the removal and destruction of excess wild horses

is technically allowed under federal law, Congress has precluded the BLM from spending any money on having them killed "for processing into commercial products."

BLM has adopted policies meant to discourage wild horses being bought for slaughter, such as a limit of four horses per purchase without prior approval.

Buyers must also describe where and how they'd care for horses and are tracked to ensure they didn't purchase animals from multiple hold-

ing facilities. According to Friends of Animals, however, past investigations have showed BLM failing to enforce these protective policies, effectively allowing wild horses to be sold for slaughter.

In a report to Congress earlier this year, the agency also proposed lifting restrictions on sales, allowing for more euthanasia and easing regulations for roundups to alleviate overpopulation in certain areas.

Though Congress hasn't acted on these requests, the plaintiff claims BLM has enacted a new guidance this year that effectively expedites the process for selling horses.

Under the policy, horses still can't be sold unless they're more than 10 years old or they have been passed over for adoption three times.

However, the agency has now mandated that adoption offers begin within a certain amount of time and calls for monthly adoption events at holding facilities, which "will accelerate the time it takes to make horses and burros sale-eligible," the complaint said.

The guidance allows as many as 25 horses to be sold without prior authorization, up from the previous four, according to the lawsuit.

"They're taking a lot of the safeguards away," said Michael Harris, attorney for Friends of Animals.

When a wild horse is adopted, the federal government retains title to the animal for the year and can follow up to ensure it's found a good home, he said.

With a sale, on the other hand, the title transfers directly to the buyer, which makes additional scrutiny necessary, Harris said.

Changes to BLM's sale guidance have violated administrative law because they were made without public notice and comment, weren't backed up with a reasoned explanation and effectively spend federal money allowing horses to be slaughtered, the complaint said.

The lawsuit requests that a federal judge overturn the BLM's 2018 guidance and stop any more horses from being sold under the policy.

USDA approves emergency grazing, cover crops in north-central Oregon

Region ravaged by large wildfires during 2018

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

Help is on the way for farmers and ranchers in north-central Oregon who lost tens of thousands of acres of cropland in a series of large wildfires that swept through the region earlier this summer.

The USDA on Wednesday approved emergency grazing for affected ranchers on Conservation Reserve Program, or CRP, land through Sept. 30. Officials with the Risk Management Agency will also allow summer fallow wheat growers to plant cover crops in burned areas to prevent soil erosion, without affecting their crop insurance.

The relief comes at the behest of Oregon congressional leaders, including Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, and Republican Rep. Greg Walden, whose district includes Wasco and Sherman counties, where the fires raged in July and August.

USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue announced the measures in a letter to Walden on Sept. 5. Perdue said the agency is compiling reported losses to determine if they will declare a federal disaster statewide.

According to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center in Portland, Oregon has experienced 1,680 fires burning 762,959 acres



Mark Graves/The Oregonian via AP A fast-moving fire rages across Wasco County southeast of The Dalles, Ore., on July 18. USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue has announced relief for farmers and ranchers affected by wildfires that burned earlier this summer in Wasco and Sherman counties.

in 2018. The 10-year average from 2006 to 2017 is 2,400 fires burning 733,019 acres, meaning this year's fires are fewer, but larger on average, than they were over the past decade.

In a statement, Walden said fires have not only impacted forests and choked communities with smoke, but also devastated farmers and ranchers — especially in Wasco and Sherman counties, where some producers lost some or nearly all of their crops.

"I applaud Secretary Perdue's prompt approval of my request to get our farmers and ranchers the assistance they need to get back on their feet after these fires," Walden said.

Large fires in the region include the Substation fire, which started July 17 and

torched 78,425 acres. The Natural Resources Conservation Service estimates the fire burned 31,000 acres of cropland and standing wheat over 86 farms in both Wasco and Sherman counties. One farmer, 64-year-old John Ruby of Wasco County, died while fighting the fire, digging a firebreak to protect his neighbor's property.

The Long Hollow fire started just nine days later, consuming another 33,451 acres south of Dufur. Finally, the South Valley fire started Aug. 1, adding another 20,026 acres. All three fires were either confirmed or likely human-caused.

A major concern now is preventing soil erosion on the blackened landscape. Farmers were encouraged to plant cover crops, but since wheat is normally grown in

a summer fallow rotation, producers worried it would put them under "continuous production" under their crop insurance.

Perdue said the Risk Management Agency, which regulates crop insurance, will make changes to accommodate growing cover crops on affected acres for the 2020 crop year.

Additionally, ranchers who lost rangeland for their livestock will have the ability to graze animals on land enrolled in CRP, a program where the federal government pays farmers to take environmentally sensitive land out of agricultural production for 10-15 years.

Wyden and Merkley both released statements saying they will continue to work toward helping farmers and ranchers recover from fires.



Lisa Hanson

ODA's Hanson wins national award

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Lisa Charpillot Hanson, deputy director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, has won the James A. Graham Award for Outstanding Service to Agriculture from the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture.

The award, which will be presented to Hanson Sept. 12 at NASDA's annual meeting in Hartford, Conn., recognizes her "leadership in highly controversial natural resources issues, participation in successful trade policy development and missions, and productive relationships with federal and state agencies," according to the association.

Hanson began her career in the food processing industry and joined ODA as the manager of its commodity commission program in 1996 before eventually working at "almost every level of the department," according to a joint letter of support from the agency's three most recent directors — Alexis Taylor, Katy Coba and Phil Ward.

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Western governors weigh in on farm bill

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The Western Governors Association has sent a letter to the leaders of the conference committee deliberating on the farm bill outlining the unique concerns of western states.

"The farm bill's conservation and forestry titles are of great significance to western governors and to the region's agricultural producers. Western states include 75 percent of our national forest and rangeland ecosystems, and their responsible management represents a significant gubernatorial concern," the association said in the letter.

The farm bill's conservation programs address a wide range of western issues including threatened and endangered species, wildlife habitat, water quality, groundwater recharge, drought response, soil health, air quality and wildfire resistance, the letter said.

The forestry title authorizes the tools upon which western governors rely to promote responsible land-management practices, and both titles promote the viability of the livestock industry — an essential component of the West's agricultural base, they said.

"Grazing management and targeted grazing are tools to achieve restoration and other land-management goals including habitat improvement, drought and wildfire mitigation and resilience, water quality and watershed health, effective soil-health management and invasive species control," the letter said.

Provisions in the conservation and forestry titles are critical for protecting wildlife habitat, managing for wildfires and restoration after wildfires and to help state, federal and private land managers address needs on the ground, Troy Timmons, WGA's director of strategic initiatives, said. "There's an awful lot in this farm bill that is important for western agriculture and western land management," he said.

The governors also support reauthorization of the Conservation Reserve Program and full funding of conservation programs.

Most are aimed at private landowners, but others — such as the Regional Conservation Partnership and State and Private Forest Landscape Restoration programs — are in partnership with federal agencies. In addition the governors support codifying the Working Lands for Wildlife program.

"Western governors support collaborative, targeted, voluntary conservation to address locally identified natural resource concerns for farm, rangeland and forest resources on private and public lands," they said.

They also support the rural-development provisions that support sustainability and economic opportunities and increase rural communities' ability to compete economically, Timmons said.

"The farm bill has a lot of good things that governors can leverage to try to address some of those concerns," he said.

One such issue is funding for broadband connectivity in rural and remote areas. Lack of access has left many rural businesses at a competitive disadvantage and citizens without access to telework, telemedicine and distance learning opportunities, the governors said.

The governors also support a strong safety net that maintains funding for key commodity, crop insurance, research, energy and export-promotion programs.