

Helicopter Horse Roundup

On August 15, BLM will begin rounding up over 700 wild horses in South Steens — using helicopters to herd the equines and their young foals into traps

BY BENTLEY FREEMAN

Throughout the Western U.S. over 75,000 wild horses roam free, grazing on public lands under the watch of the Bureau of Land Management's Wild Horse and Burro Program.

Since the 1970s, after the passing of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, the BLM has been using helicopters to herd the wild horses into traps — often to the detriment of the animals' health, advocates say.

"The Bureau of Land Management is ironically engaging in the very activities that led to the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971," says Scott Beckstead, a lecturer in animal law at Willamette University and animal rights advocate.

"Profiteers were chasing down wild horses on Western public lands with their aircraft so that they could then be captured and sent to be made into pet food," he says of the '70s roundups — or as the BLM prefers, "gathers."

On August 15, and for several days following, the BLM will round up more than 760 horses from the South Steens Herd Management Area (HMA), about 70 miles south of Burns using the same tactics to "protect the environment." The BLM previously culled the herd in September 2022 to "restore a thriving natural ecological balance."

On August 2, John Borowski, alongside other members of Advocates for Wild Equines, gathered at a ranch in Spencer Creek to discuss the upcoming roundup. Several horses, acquired from BLM auctions, are at the ranch to be gentled. Borowski says it's important to get the message out there, because most people don't know that wild horses still run free.

Borowski, an environmental biologist and science teacher in Philomath, witnessed the last roundup, and he says, "It was brutal." Watching this unfold, with the horses slamming into one another being chased by the helicopter, Borowski says he remembers being told by a BLM official that "this is the most humane way."

"You just call bullshit for bullshit," he says. According to BLM's website, 22 horses died during that roundup operation and afterward due to extreme stress.

He's worried that several foals won't survive this roundup.

BLM did not respond to *Eugene Weekly's* request for comment. The BLM's web page about the gathering says the South Steens HMA can only support 159 to 304 horses, under half of the current estimated population. Seventy of the horses captured will be returned to the range, half of which would be mares treated with contraceptives.

Since the Wild Horse and Burro Program began, BLM started rounding up horses using a technique called helicopter drive-trapping. The BLM contracts with a company called Cattoor Livestock Roundup company, which flies helicopters only a couple of feet above the herd to drive the equines into traps.

The founder of Cattoor, David Cattoor, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of "use of aircraft to capture wild horses" in 1992. "Yet he and his company remained the BLM top choice to conduct these roundups," Beckstead says.

According to Beckstead, many horses, mostly foals, do not survive the roundup.

Those horses who survive are then put into holding corrals, like the one near Burns, to be "auctioned off." Except, he says, that's not the reality.

The BLM's adoption incentive program awards \$1,000



Photo by John F. Borowski

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per horse to the adopter, up to four horses, after caring for the animal for over a year. After that one year, many of the wild equines end up in slaughterhouses in Canada and Mexico, Beckstead says.

There is a piece of federal legislation, called the Save America's Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act, that would ban the export and slaughter of horses for human consumption. However, Beckstead says the bill isn't moving forward due to extensive lobbying from the livestock industry.

According to Beckstead, BLM gives priority to the livestock industry over the wild horses.

Over 50 percent of the 177 HMAs — where free-roaming herds are cataloged and monitored — no longer have any wild horses.

With 17 in southeastern Oregon, the BLM conducts roundups "as needed" to cull the wild equine population, often citing overpopulation that leads to overgrazed Western public lands — of which it manages 155 million acres.

Beckstead says that the BLM's own data puts the blame on livestock — specifically cattle and sheep.

An estimated 1.5 million cattle graze on public lands, compared to 75,000 horses, according to a study done by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. According to that same study, more than two-thirds of BLM acreage is not meeting its own land health standards due to solely livestock overgrazing — while only 1 percent of failing acres are solely caused by wild horses.

Currently, to graze on public lands, the BLM charges a \$1.35 fee per animal unit month — the amount of forage used by one animal unit per month, like the sagegrass in eastern Oregon. Per the BLM, an animal unit is one cow and one calf, or five sheep.

Beckstead says a lot of corporations take advantage of that taxpayer-subsidized \$1.35 rate, specifically noting JR Simplot, one of the largest corporate food producers internationally. "It's making money on the front end, but it's also making millions and millions of dollars holding on to captured wild horses because it owns a feedlot in Idaho," he says.

According to Beckstead, any horse not adopted out of the BLM-operated holding corral near Burns gets sent to a long-term holding facility, such as JR Simplot's feedlots in Idaho. In 2018, an outbreak of an equine upper-respiratory illness called "strangles" occurred in JR Simplot's Bruneau, Idaho, off-range corral.

In 2024, the BLM awarded \$2.4 million to JR Simplot's subsidiary, Simplot Livestock Co., which operates off-range corrals for wild-horses and burros. The U.S. federal government has awarded this corporate entity with several grants since 2009.

JR Simplot declined *EW's* request for comment.

American taxpayers paid over \$330 million to five livestock companies to just hold onto the captive wild horses on their property. The horses there are standing on bare dirt and are not allowed to free roam, Beckstead says.

"Because of its historic loyalty to the livestock industry," Beckstead says, "it pushes a false narrative of too many horses to excuse rounding up those horses so that all of that acreage and forage can be offered to commercial livestock interests."

The Bureau of Land Management will begin rounding up wild horses in South Steens on August 15. To make arrangements in advance to attend and observe, go to [BLM.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/herd-management/gathers-and-removals](https://blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/herd-management/gathers-and-removals).