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OUR VIEW

Time has come for solving West's wild horse problem

The concept of wild horses running as free as the wind across the open spaces of the West is admittedly appealing. The horses, which over the centuries have become a part of the Western landscape, offer a glimpse of the old days.

But the difference between the concept of wild horses and the reality is vast.

The reality is the population of invasive wild horses is so far out of control that they damage the land, streams and rivers, causing harm to the habitat of native species such as greater sage grouse, pronghorn, deer, elk, fish and bighorn sheep. By destroying range land and stream banks, the horses reverse any progress that has been made by land managers and ranchers aimed at restoring habitat.

Ranchers say the wild horses have forced federal land managers to curtail livestock grazing in some areas. They fear the spiraling horse population will only mean more restrictions — and damage to range land.

But there's an even darker side to leaving wild horses unmanaged in the West. Just last month in Arizona, more than 100 wild horses died, the victims of the drought that has overcome parts of the state. More horses will die of thirst and starvation as the drought continues and the land cannot sustain them.

Elsewhere, officials with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management have struggled with the overwhelming number of horses. The estimated wild horse population has grown to 86,000 and ranchers say it could as much as double every four years. BLM has



Larisa Bogardus/BLM

A gather of wild horses from the Beaty Butte Management Area, adjacent to the Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in southern Oregon. The Bureau of Land Management has come up with four plans for managing wild horses.

rounded up tens of thousands of horses, but without birth control and other efforts the population will continue to grow out of control. The cost of keeping horses in BLM holding facilities is estimated at \$1 billion for their lifetime.

The BLM has come up with a plan — actually, four plans — for reducing the wild horse population to 26,715, which they figure is a manageable and sustainable number. The plans include a variety of tactics, including the sale of horses without restriction, adoption, contraception and sterilization. One

even suggests giving as much as \$1,000 to anyone who adopts a horse.

Because Congress has the ultimate say on how the BLM will proceed, it's difficult to tell which option — or combination of options — will be used.

We urge Congress to approve an effective combination that will help BLM managers get the wild horse problem under control as quickly as possible.

Clearly, something needs to be done, because what's already been done hasn't worked.

OTHER VIEWS

The Mississippi man tried six times for the same crime

One morning nearly 22 years ago, four employees of a furniture store in a small Mississippi town were shot to death. For months afterward, local law enforcement seemed stumped by the crime. Eventually, the top prosecutor — Doug Evans — charged a former store employee, Curtis Flowers, a black man who had no criminal record.

The case since then has been unlike any other I've ever heard of. Evans has put Flowers on trial six separate times — even though no gun, fingerprints or other physical evidence ties Flowers to the crime and no witness even puts him at the store that day.

At each of the first three trials, Flowers was convicted, but the Mississippi Supreme Court threw out all three convictions. The first two times, it cited misconduct by Evans during the trial, and the third time it found that Evans had kept African-Americans off the jury. The justices called it as bad a case of such racial discrimination "as we have ever seen."

The fourth trial was the first to have more than one black juror, and it ended with a hung jury. The fifth also had multiple black jurors and likewise ended in a mistrial. The sixth trial had only one black juror, and Flowers was convicted, thanks largely to dubious circumstantial testimony that Evans had coached witnesses to give.

I see no good reason to believe that Curtis Flowers is guilty. Yet today he sits in solitary confinement, on death row, in Mississippi's Parchman Prison. He is serving his 22nd straight year behind bars, having never been released between convictions. He will turn 48 years old next week. His parents continue to visit him as often as possible.

His heartbreaking, enraging story is the subject of a new podcast — the second season of "In the Dark," led by Madeleine Baran of American Public Media — that's been downloaded more than 2 million times. The reporting and storytelling are fantastic, and I can't capture all of it here. If you aren't already listening to the podcast, I recommend it.

While the Flowers case is shocking in its details, it is all too typical in its broad strokes: The United States suffers from a crisis of unjust imprisonment. The crisis has been caused partly by powerful, unaccountable prosecutors, like Doug Evans. And the costs are borne overwhelmingly by black men, like Flowers.

We now know that dozens of innocent people have been executed in recent decades. Many others languish behind bars. My colleague Nicholas Kristof, in his latest column, told the story of Kevin Cooper, who's on death row in California because of highly questionable evidence. Cases like these are the most extreme part of our mass-incarceration problem.

As legal scholar Michelle Alexander has noted, a larger share of black Americans are imprisoned than black South Africans were

during apartheid. "A human rights nightmare is occurring on our watch," she has written.

When Americans today look back on the past, many of us wonder how our ancestors could have tolerated blatant injustices — like child labor, Jim Crow or male-only voting — for so long. When future generations look back on our era, I expect they will ask a similar question. They will be outraged that we

forcibly confined a couple million of our fellow human beings to cages, often for no good reason.

President Donald Trump and his attorney general, Jeff Sessions, are trying to make the problem even worse, by locking up ever more people.

But Trump and Sessions can't squelch the burgeoning, bipartisan movement for criminal-justice reform. They can't, because as the recent Pulitzer-winning author James Forman Jr. points out, criminal justice happens mostly at the local and state levels. "We should always remember that the fight is going to be at the local level," Forman told NPR's Terry Gross. "And, there, we continue to win."

To take one example, manufactured jailhouse confessions are a common part of wrongful prosecutions (and are central to the Flowers case). With a shocking frequency, prosecutors and police coax so-called snitches to lie outright about what other prisoners say. In response, Texas enacted a law last year requiring the tracking of snitches and the disclosure of any plea deals to defense attorneys, who can then call the testimony into question in front of a jury. Rebecca Brown of the Innocence Project told me that the Texas law was "excellent" — and that the Illinois Legislature had passed an even better version, awaiting the governor's signature.

Elsewhere, some district attorneys are trying to make the system fairer on their own. It's happening in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and other cities. Most prosecutors, after all, are decent, ethical public servants. One change involves "open-file" policies, which give the defense attorney access to all the evidence in a case. That may seem like an obvious step, and it's the norm in civil trials. Yet it remains rare in criminal trials.

I don't want to exaggerate the recent progress. As you read this column, thousands upon thousands of American citizens sit behind bars, unjustly denied their freedom. "Oooh, I miss Curtis," his devastated father, Archie Flowers, says on the podcast. "Yes. It is rough. Rough, rough, rough, rough."

But the Flowers family refuses to give up hoping for justice. Curtis Flowers' sixth conviction is being appealed, and new evidence — uncovered by the podcast — seems likely to help that appeal.

If the Flowers family won't give in to despair, nobody else should, either.

David Leonhardt is an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*.



YOUR VIEWS

Boycott Hermiston's out-of-state commencement

It's a shame that a handful of individuals rewrote Hermiston High School's history by altering the 2018 graduation commencement. They decided to move the ceremony out of state in another city.

With all the property they gained from the vacant fairgrounds, they could have housed a ceremony with more than ample parking. Imagine being educated your long life in Hermiston, but how your special day has been decided by a few grads.

Boycott your graduation. The high school has to give you your diploma. Hold your own ceremony in Hermiston.

Shame on the individuals who came up with this plan — it's obvious they weren't Hermiston alums. Just don't let this happen again in 2019. Boycott.

Don Hansen, president
Hermiston
Class of 1960

Forest Service fire-fighting futility

"Acts of futility" is an appropriate description of the U.S. Forest Service's use of aircraft to fight forest fires today. But let's examine the evidence that earns such criticism:

First, there is little if any leadership. No one person is in charge. It looks like a pilot arrives at the fire site and dumps his load wherever he pleases. There is no designated area to attack and concentrate their efforts to extinguish the fire. There is no follow-up of aircraft, one after another to keep the fire down. So after 10 minutes the fire has recovered

and there is no evidence of the event.

For a comparison, have your large army have its soldiers fight as independent soldiers with no command structure. It would be a disaster for your army even though your army is substantially larger than your enemies' army.

Without a leader there is little evidence of coordination and timing. Those qualities can be explained as hitting the targeted fire area hard and keep hitting it hard, one after another. This prevents the fire from recovering and finally the selected area is completely extinguished. Then they move on to the next selected area and repeat the same scene until all the entire fire is extinguished.

In my article, I explain that the commander may hold a dozen or more of these very large aircraft in a queue and when they are all in position, he orders a long line of them to hit a specific target, one after the other. (Of course they are flying at slightly different altitudes, generally above the preceding aircraft to avoid turbulence problems.) This defines coordination and timing.

Another is their choice of aircraft. Helicopters are an expensive joke. Their tiny payloads, high acquisition cost and equally high operating cost make their use a gross waste of funds. Most of the balance of the aircraft also have grossly insufficient loads.

This combination of all these factors including a lack of being effective make their use largely a waste of funds. It is also why sufficient numbers of aircraft were never purchased as they could not be justified. This fact is also behind why the U.S. Forest Service is proposing to stop using aircraft to fight forest fires.

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