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A Dramatic Rescue for Doomed Wild Horses of the West

By Lyndsey Layton
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The unwanted horses seemed destined for death. The wheels had been set in motion to put down about 2,000 healthy mustangs, those in a federally maintained herd of wild horses and burros that no one wanted to adopt.

The Bureau of Land Management knew that euthanasia was a legal alternative, but officials were proceeding slowly, afraid of an intense public outcry. The wild horses had become too expensive to maintain, and cattlemen argued that turning them loose would be a drain on the already scarce grazing lands of the West.

Then yesterday, at a public hearing in Reno, Nev., to discuss the issue, a solution arrived on a white horse, so to speak.

Madeleine Pickens, wife of billionaire T. Boone Pickens, made known her intentions to adopt not just the doomed wild horses but most or all of the 30,000 horses and burros kept in federal holding pens. Lifelong animal lovers, the Pickenses just a few years ago led the fight to close the last horse slaughterhouse in the United States.

Madeleine Pickens is looking for land in the West that would be an appropriate home for the horses.

She is working with the BLM staff to adopt the horses, said Henri Bisson, the bureau's deputy director, while the agency persuades Congress to shift \$20 million in funding to feed and protect the horses now in captivity for another year. As backup to Pickens's offer, he said, two other groups, both animal rescue organizations, have expressed similar interest in adoption. "We are very hopeful that euthanasia won't be necessary this year," he said.

The news that Pickens and others intend to adopt the wild horses and burros was celebrated by animal rights groups, several of which were preparing legal challenges to prevent the government from putting the horses to death.

"Of course, I'm thrilled, obviously, that these horses are getting a reprieve," said Shelley Sawhook, president of the American Horse Defense Fund. "At the same time, we need to address the basic issue of how these animals got in this position in the first place."

Bisson said policymakers have to resolve the conflict between a law that permits euthanasia and a nation that is opposed to it. "This is a situation where we have to have a conversation about what the law requires," he said. "We're hearing from members of Congress they don't think euthanasia is an appropriate solution, but the law says, 'You shall.'" If people don't like what the law says, they need to address it. We hope we will find homes for all of these animals before the year is out and Congress will

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decide what it wants to do about the law."

Long an American icon and inspiration for song and story, the wild horse has special protection under a 1971 law. The federal statute calls wild horses "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West" that should be "protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death." But the same law also requires the government to achieve "appropriate management levels" of roaming horses so they don't overwhelm federal lands -- and that's the part that has been vexing for bureau officials.

About 33,000 horses still roam wild on federal lands in 10 Western states. About half of those are in Nevada. The federal agency believes the range can accommodate only about 27,000 horses, and each year government-hired cowboys round up 7,000 to 13,000 horses and take them to holding pens in several states.

Right now, there are just over 30,000 horses in holding facilities awaiting adoption. Those 10 or older or those who have not been adopted after three tries can be sold without restriction under 2004 legislation.

Wild horses compete with cattle and wildlife for food and water. Horse advocates say federal officials have made faulty assumptions about the number of horses that can be accommodated on federal land, tilting those findings in favor of cattle interests.

"We're livestock people. We know animals live and die. And we take that as a very normal part of life. We fully realize animal rights people hate that aspect of the livestock industry. We don't particularly seek the euthanization. What we seek is the management of the population," said Jeff Eisenberg, director of federal lands for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, an industry lobbying group.

The federal government has been rounding up wild horses since the 1980s, putting them in holding facilities and offering them for adoption to horse lovers, who promise not to sell them for slaughter. But the roundups became aggressive under the Bush administration. As of June, BLM was holding 30,088 animals, more than triple the 9,807 held in 2001.

Bisson said yesterday that the BLM would limit the roundups next year to about 5,000 horses.

Meanwhile, the pace of adoptions has been falling as the cost of feeding and caring for the wild horses has skyrocketed. The price tag to federal taxpayers for maintaining the horses tripled from \$7 million in 2000 to \$21 million in 2007. Hay prices for one short-term holding facility in Nevada rose from about \$160 per ton in 2007 to almost \$300 per ton in 2008, for example.

In a report released last week, the Government Accountability Office called the situation a "crisis" and said the bureau needed to exercise its options, including euthanasia and the practice of selling the wild horses "without restriction," meaning they could be sold for slaughter.

In the first analysis of BLM's wild horse program in 18 years, the GAO found that the agency lacked a coherent nationwide management policy. The GAO recommended that the bureau investigate alternatives to euthanasia and adoption.

Animal rights groups say the government ought to sterilize horses and return them to the wild to live out their lives. In addition, they say, it should offer tax incentives to landowners who allow wild horses to live on private land.

Virginie L. Parant of the American Wild Horses Preservation Campaign, a coalition of about 45 groups,

said the BLM does not use a scientifically sound method to estimate the size of horse herds or the number of horses that can be sustained on the range. That makes the roundups arbitrary, she said.

What's more, about 19 million acres of land where wild horses once roamed have been removed from the program, reducing the amount of land available to the horses and increasing their concentration elsewhere.

People on all sides of the issue recognize some fundamental changes are needed.

"It's intractable," Eisenberg said. "The animal rights people put the BLM in a box. We are seeking a balance in the land. Congress doesn't want to put more funding into these holding facilities, especially when times are tight. It's a problem nobody likes."

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