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Editorial: Our expanding population makes conflicts over wildlife inevitable

MARCH 21, 2010

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Absurd.



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There simply is no better word to describe this nation's policies for dealing with the tens of thousands of wild horses -- or feral horses, if you prefer -- that roam the open ranges of the West.

How else would you describe policies that have allowed some 37,000 horses and burros, if the Bureau of Land Management's numbers are correct, to continue living on the public lands at the same time as nearly as many are kept in pens waiting to be adopted or relocated, at taxpayers' ever-increasing expense? (It's closer to 25,000 on the range, according to advocates for the horses; the differing numbers are just one reason that there's no agreement on what to do about them.)

How else would you describe the decades-old spitting match between federal land managers charged with keeping the range available for multiple uses and the horses' protectors, who believe they're being managed to extinction?

No one is happy: not the BLM, which is only doing its -- thankless -- job; not the horses' advocates, who view the ongoing roundups as inhumane; not the ranchers, who believe there are too many horses for equitable use of the land; and probably not the horses, who would just as soon prefer to be left alone ... as long as they have food to eat and water to drink.

• o o

The president's budget for 2010-11 proposes to spend \$75.5 million on the BLM's horse and burro management program, a \$12 million increase.

Another \$42.5 million would be spent on land in

the East and Midwest for wild horse "preserves" far away from their Western ranges.

At a time when Congress has been fighting over a health-care plan estimated to cost near \$1 trillion, the budget for managing horses is trivial. Yet the nation's taxpayers who are neither enamored of the wild horses as a "living symbol of the West" nor particularly disturbed by them (unless they find their way into their suburban back yards) have to wonder what they're getting for their money.



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C*A*R*E* Chest board members/advisory board members, from left, Jim Nachiondo, founder Bill Kahl, John Owen, Jon Killoran, Tim Ottmann, Ken Stark and Steve Tapogna. (Submitted to the RGJ)

SNAPSHOT

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OUR VIEW: 'Absurd' policies lead to arguments but don't help animals.

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Is it more humane, they have the right to ask, to put the horses out to pasture in a wild animal park-like setting in the East (complete with scenic overlooks, perhaps) than to leave them to nature's mercy in the West?

An equally important question: Is it even possible any more for government agencies to manage public lands for maximum multiple use, or are the demands too great for any agency to be able to make everyone happy?

That's not a wild-horse question or cattle-grazing question. That's a question of the nature of a growing, mobile population that continues to spread into once-wild lands. Like the wildfires that weren't a problem until homes encroached on formerly open space, wild horses -- and bears, and coyotes, and wolves, and deer -- weren't a problem until homes and ranches started cutting off their freedom to roam.

We mourn the loss of habitat for the other wild animals, and occasionally we create preserves for them, too. But we have yet to come to terms with the horses because ... well, because they're horses.

Until we're willing to make tough decisions for dealing with them, the arguments will continue and the horses will suffer.

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