



The Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act (H.R. 4356)

Support the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act, H.R. 4356, introduced by Reps. Dina Titus (D-NV), Steve Cohen (D-TN), and Juan Ciscomani (R-AZ), to prohibit inhumane helicopter roundups of wild horses.

Led by Reps. Dina Titus (D-NV), David Schweikert (R-AZ), and Steve Cohen (D-TN), the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act (H.R. 4356) would end the use of helicopters in roundups of wild horses and burros. Helicopter roundups (which are euphemistically termed “gathers” by the federal government) are dangerous operations, often resulting in injuries or fatalities to wild horses as terrified animals flee for miles across rough terrain and in harsh conditions. Additionally, roundups are extremely expensive; according to federal records, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has spent more than \$25 million in taxpayer dollars since fiscal year 2017 on helicopter roundups. Indeed, the BLM’s approach to “managing” wild horses and burros—removing them from the range and keeping them in holding facilities for the rest of their lives—consumes tens of millions of dollars each year (most of the BLM’s Wild Horse and Burro Program budget). This bipartisan bill would promote fiscal responsibility and the humane treatment of wild equines by prohibiting the use of helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft by BLM staff or contractors to round up wild horses.

BACKGROUND

The BLM is tasked with managing wild horses and burros on our nation’s public lands by the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971, which states that these animals “shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death” (16 U.S. Code § 1331). Yet under the BLM’s current management regime, federally protected herds are consistently subjected to extreme stress and potentially fatal injuries through roundup operations that utilize low-flying helicopters to chase panicked animals, including pregnant mares, young foals, and elderly horses. Under the BLM’s guidelines, wild equines can be chased in temperatures as high as 105 degrees or as low as 10 degrees; those same guidelines are silent



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on the distance that horses can be pursued by a helicopter.¹ Viable alternatives exist to helicopter roundups, which do not cost more (and, indeed, likely cost less); bait and water trapping, for example, offers a lower stress method of gathering wild horses and burros.

Roundups are conducted to remove horses from Herd Management Areas (HMAs)—designated habitat for wild equines—and most often rely on exploiting the flight response of these prey animals. Horses are pursued for miles until they enter into makeshift trap pens. Worked into a panic, horses may catch and break limbs crashing into trap panels, or they may experience “capture myopathy”—becoming overexerted to the point of death. Family herds are invariably separated during these events, including foals too young to survive on their own. Once rounded up, most horses will spend the rest of their lives in holding facilities.



AWI FACT SHEET



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The Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act was prompted in part by a horrific incident during a 2022 roundup in Nevada where a colt broke his leg while being relentlessly chased by a helicopter; footage showed the panicked young horse struggling to continue running. Eventually, after half an hour, the animal was euthanized. This jarring incident underscored the suffering that commonly occurs during helicopter roundups.

In 2021 and 2022, the BLM undertook the largest roundup of wild horses in US history, removing a staggering 3,500 horses from their habitat in Wyoming. During this operation, horses died of broken necks, broken limbs, and even a ruptured uterus. In fact, the BLM removed 20,000 horses and burros from the wild in fiscal year 2022 alone—a historic high for the agency.² Helicopter roundups are particularly counterproductive as a management strategy; as the National Academy of Sciences concluded in its comprehensive report to the BLM on wild horse and burro management, roundup operations can spur population growth in horses remaining on the range through compensatory reproduction.³ Not surprisingly, a reliance on roundups has failed to stabilize populations. Utilizing humane and proven fertility control methods—in particular, the porcine zona pellucida (PZP) immunocontraceptive vaccine—offers a more sensible, cost-effective, and proactive approach to managing horses in their natural habitats, thereby avoiding the costs of keeping wild horses in holding facilities, which is enormously expensive.

The BLM spent \$109 million of its fiscal year 2023 Wild Horse and Burro Program budget on off-range holding alone.⁴ This program's budget has only continued to rise—increasing from \$75 million in FY2018 to almost \$148 million in FY2023. With regard to helicopter roundups, much of this taxpayer expense is funneled to a small number of contractors, typically private livestock companies that have been awarded millions of dollars to remove wild horses. Roundups are often prompted by pressure from the livestock industry, which wants wild horses removed so cattle can graze on those same public lands at a cost far below market value.⁵ Ironically, cattle far outnumber wild horses on the range; grazing receipts from recent years show that cattle outnumber horses roughly 28 to 1 on BLM land.⁶

THE SOLUTION

Reps. Dina Titus (D-NV), David Schweikert (R-AZ), and Steve Cohen (D-TN) have introduced the Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act (H.R. 4356) to prohibit the use of helicopters to round up wild horses and burros. This bill would end the cruelty of the roundups and set the federal government on a far more sustainable and fiscally responsible path for managing our nation's herds. The bill would also require the US Governmental Accountability Office to submit a report to Congress that details the impacts of aircraft chases on wild horses and burros and outlines humane alternatives to helicopter roundups.

For additional information, please contact Joanna Grossman at joanna@awionline.org.

1. Bureau of Land Management Comprehensive Animal Welfare Program for Wild Horse and Burro Gathers Standards. Available: <https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2020-12/PIM2021-002%20att1.pdf>
2. Bureau of Land Management Wild Horse and Burro Program Data. Available: <https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/about-the-program/program-data>
3. The National Academies Press, Using Science to Improve the BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program: A Way Forward (2013)
4. Bureau of Land Management Wild Horse and Burro Program Data. Available: <https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/about-the-program/program-data>
5. Washington Journal of Environmental Law, Climate Change Has Beef with Federal Cattle Grazing (2021). Available: <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/wjelp/vol11/iss3/7>
6. The Daily Pitchfork, Analysis of BLM grazing receipts (2002-2018). Available: <https://dailypitchfork.org/?p=1417>