

## **IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 297 -**

### **To restore the prohibition on the commercial sale and slaughter of wild horses.**

With the overwhelming support of the American public, the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act (Wild Horse Act) was passed in 1971 directing the Interior and Agriculture Departments to protect and preserve the animals as "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; [...] an integral part of the natural system of the public lands."

The Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the principal administrative agency empowered to enforce the Wild Horse Act, and is responsible for the management of wild horses and burros on public rangelands in ten western states -- California, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming and Montana. In addition to wild horses and burros, the public rangelands also support desert and mountain ecosystems, wildlife, recreational uses, and commercial uses such as livestock grazing and mining operation, all of which are under the stewardship of BLM, pursuant to the principle of "multiple-use."

BLM estimates there are currently less than 35,000 wild horses and burros on the public lands, with the majority being found in Nevada. By comparison, approximately 2 million large wildlife (antelope, deer, elk, bighorn sheep) and 4.1 million domestic livestock, primarily cattle and sheep, also share the rangelands. Since 1974, wild horse and burro populations have been cut in half, threatening genetic viability, and have been totally eliminated from over 100 herd areas.

Before BLM can remove wild horses and burros from public rangelands, it must show that removals are necessary to "preserve and maintain a thriving ecological balance and multiple-use relationship," as required by the Wild Horse Act. However, according to a 1990 GAO Report, BLM does not "base its removal of wild horses from federal rangeland on how many horses ranges could support." Nonetheless, despite inadequate funding for proper censusing and habitat monitoring, and an Adopt-A-Horse or Burro Program that is also underfunded, BLM expects to remove another 9,300 in FY'05.

Language was inserted into the FY'05 Omnibus Spending Bill that mandates that any excess horse or burro be sold "without limitation" to the highest bidder "if the animal is more than 10 years of age or has been offered unsuccessfully for adoption at least 3 times." According to the proponent, this will lead to a "more robust adoption program." However, sale authority does not carry with it the protections against commercial use as the Adopt-A-Horse Program mandates, and the approximate 8,400 animals meeting the above criteria are now subject to public auction and potential sale for slaughter.

On January 25, 2005, responding to public outcry, Reps. Nick Rahall (D-WV) and Ed Whitfield (R-KY) introduced legislation to restore the prohibition on the commercial sale and slaughter of wild horses and burros. H.R. 297 is pending before the House Committee on Resources. We urge you to co-sponsor the bill, or introduce a companion bill in the Senate, as applicable.