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March 29, 2007

Mr. Dale Hall
Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Hall:

The protection of wild, free-roaming horses on Western federal lands is a matter of significant concern to me. Recent press reports announcing the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) seizure in Alberta, Canada, of 10 American mustangs culled from the herd at the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge raise serious questions in my mind about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) existing wild horse removal and adoption program. I am writing to request an immediate and thorough reevaluation of this entire program.

At present, the FWS implements its wild horse removal and adoption programs pursuant to regulations found at 50 CFR 30.11-12 and under guidance provided in the Refuge Manual at 7 RM 6. Under the existing program, the FWS is required to implement a rigid screening process and comprehensive background check on all potential adoption agents. In addition, existing regulations require the FWS to enter into cooperative agreements with all such adoption vendors to ensure that any adopted wild horse is placed in qualified humane facility to live out its natural life.

The RCMP seizure clearly exposes the inadequacy of the existing regulatory framework and I would like to know exactly what the FWS is doing to cooperate with the RCMP investigation. The credibility and compliance of contracted adoption agents is now suspect and in need of immediate review. Moreover, existing procedures to track adopted animals once they have been transferred to the care of an adoption agent can no longer be assumed to be effective. The entire screening and tracking processes should be critically reevaluated from top to bottom.

Dale Hall
March 29, 2007
Page 2

This is a serious matter. Unlike other wild horses that roam on other federal lands which are protected under the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Protection Act, wild horses found on National Wildlife Refuges have no such protection other than that provided by the FWS. It is your responsibility to ensure the long-term protection of these animals.

For this reason, and because of concerns outlined in this letter, I respectfully request that the FWS initiate a comprehensive re-evaluation of this program and suspend adoptions until such time as new procedures can be developed and deployed to prevent the reoccurrence of similar incidents. I would appreciate the courtesy of a reply at your earliest convenience.

With warm regards, I am

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nick Rahall". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and a long, sweeping underline.

NICK J. RAHALL, II
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources

NJR/jz/