

CUJ Opinion

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To Congress: Consider feral horse policies

Jason Smith, President, National Tribal Horse Coalition, from Warm Springs sent this letter to Congress in mid-June.

On June 13, the House Appropriations Committee passed an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2014 Agricultural Bill that would reinstate the ban on funding USDA inspectors of horse meat. You and your colleagues must have done this without knowing the effect this action would have on Tribal land throughout our country.

Two years ago, due to the growing concern about the welfare of horses because of the closure of the slaughter facilities, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report that documented that not funding USDA horse meat inspectors resulted in widespread starvation, neglect, abandonment, and unnecessary suffering of the horse, especially in Indian Country. In response, Congressional action was taken to end the prohibition of funding for USDA ante-mortem horse inspections. President Obama signed the measure into law on November 11, 2011. To date, the USDA has not implemented this law.

The 113th Congress and the President have been blatantly unresponsive to the Tribal concerns on this issue. A reinstatement of this ban will make already severe conditions on Trust land only worse.

Indian Country has long been subject to the whims of the Congress of the United States.

Federal lawmakers make policy in law that has far reaching impacts on the lands held in trust for the benefit of the Indian owners (Tribes and individuals). For example, the General Allotment Act (and related Acts) had far reaching impacts for both the U.S. Treasury and to Indian Country. Many of these Indian Country lands have recently seen the settlement of long-standing disputes of both policy and management issues with the United States (i.e. Cobell and Keepseagle) where federal Executive Agencies have settled Tribal and individual Indian claims stemming from both bad policy made by Congress and poorly executed management and policy on the part of the Departments and Agencies of the United States.

We in Indian Country know that our ability to affect Congressional action is often restricted when our voice is overridden in populist, popular and special interest forums

of the majority culture. The emotional fervor of groups advocating for a ban on equine slaughter is a current case of this phenomena.

The reason the National Tribal Horse Coalition (NTHC) is stepping into this rather unpopular fight is that U.S. policy could be taking another wrong turn of historic significance for the trust lands in much of Indian Country. NTHC sees the need to realistically address this problem of overpopulation of horses and we look to you to assist in addressing our situation. If this policy continues, you must, in turn, address the real consequences of your action, and set aside funds to address the decline of our lands and natural resources caused by the overpopulation of horses.

Perhaps you could envision a program similar to what the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) does with their wild horses and burros. Unfortunately, it has been obvious for years that the BLM situation is another failed policy of horse management that has resulted in costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year without any measurable return during times of serious budget deficits. Realistically, we do not need another drain to our economy.

If you are really concerned about the welfare of horses, and have seen the devastation the overpopulation of horses has had on Tribal land, and are respectful of the Tribal perspective, please reevaluate your position on this matter. If you do, you can prevent the “unintended consequences” of this failed policy resulting in widespread starvation, neglect, abandonment, and unnecessary suffering of horses and the devastating environmental damage this policy has had on Tribal land by funding USDA inspectors for horse meat.

Too many feral horses

With no domestic slaughterhouses, wild horses are increasing

By Andrew Clevenger / *The Bulletin*

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WASHINGTON — Few images evoke the American West the way a wild horse does, running free across rangeland with its mane blowing in the wind.

From Westerns to music videos to beer commercials, a galloping horse is visual shorthand for freedom, vitality and self-sufficiency.

But in reality, wild horses can pose a problem to their local ecosystems, as growing herds forage and trample their way across large swaths of territory. Recent changes to federal policy have left several Indian tribes, including the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, with more wild horses than their reservations can support, and limited options to get rid of them.

In 2006, Congress eliminated funding for inspection of horse slaughterhouses, effectively ending all domestic butchering of horses.

Although horsemeat is not embraced in the U.S., it is eaten in other countries, and during 2006, the last full year they were operational, three American slaughterhouses killed more than 105,000 horses and exported 17,000 metric tons of horsemeat valued at \$65 million, according to a 2011 report on wild horses by the Government Accountability Office.

Horses continue to be slaughtered in Mexico and Canada, but the glut of horses exported from America has driven down prices, especially on the lower-valued horses that are most often butchered for meat. The combination of longer distances to transport horses and lower sale prices have made it less economically viable to remove excess horses, and herds on tribal lands have grown as a result.

Last week, Jason Smith, president of the National Tribal Horse Coalition, wrote to members of the Senate Appropriations Committee, urging them to restore the funding for inspectors that would reopen American slaughterhouses.

"Some reference horses of this nature as 'wild,' but that description is neither biologically or historically accurate; these horses are feral," Smith wrote.

There are almost 5,000 feral horses on the Warm Springs Reservation, 75,000 across the Navajo Nation in Utah, Arizona and New Mexico, and more than 12,000 on the Yakama Reservation in Washington State.

"Through both overgrazing and trampling these animals are doing severe environmental and ecological damage to that Tribe's homelands," noted Smith, who is the range manager at Warm Springs. "The effects are profound. Native deer and elk, that once flourished and which provide sustenance to the Yakama people on lands the U.S. promised to protect, are now becoming scarce in many parts of the reservation."

Range degradation and the lack of vegetation is also undermining restoration efforts for salmon in streams and sage grouse on rangelands, he said.

Herds can grow up to 20 percent annually, meaning they double in size every five years.

"It's just like a cattle herd. People manage their herds by culling," Smith told The Bulletin. "If you don't have enough (resources) for them, the next thing you know your livestock has an undesirable quality."

With no outlet for the excess horses, fewer families are tending them as livestock, which only makes the problem worse.

"Since this (ban) came about, it took a few years to settle in, but eventually it's all expense and no return on the horses," Smith said.

As he noted in his letter, the feral horses are not pets or companions, and while ending domestic slaughtering of wild horses may seem humane, the new federal policy has unintended consequences.

"It's just going to make the problem worse, and prolongs the agony of it all," he said.

Overpopulation leads to starvation for the horses, and horses often roam onto roads and highways, creating a traffic hazard, he said.

In addition, tribal land has become a dumping ground for people who can no longer afford to feed their own horses but have no other way to get rid of them.

"People just get rid of the problem, and let it be someone else's problem," Smith said. "We're just trying to be able to manage our herds, and we can't do that right now, the way things are."

By contrast, the Bureau of Land Management actively culls herds of wild horses on public lands and keeps horses in federally funded holding facilities. Sometimes the horses are sold, but often they remain indefinitely in the BLM facilities.

Earlier this year, the BLM established a limit of four animals per buyer for each six-month period following media reports that since 2008, a single buyer in Colorado has purchased more than

1,700 wild horses from the BLM — almost 70 percent of all horses sold by the agency during that period. The buyer, Tom Davis of La Jara, Colo., cannot account for the whereabouts of all those horses, many of which are suspected to have been sold to Mexican slaughterhouses, according to a joint investigation by Propublica and the Colorado Springs Gazette.

According to BLM estimates, 31,500 wild horses live on public lands overseen by the agency in the West. This is about 11,000 more than the total the agency believes the rangelands can support.

Earlier this month, both the House and Senate appropriations committees voted not to fund inspectors, which would effectively continue the “no domestic slaughterhouse” policy.

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