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Wild Horse Management of Carson City Nevada- What the Public Thinks

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Wild Horse Management of Carson City Nevada- What the Public Thinks

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Abstract

There are two types of management strategies that are used in Carson City, NV, which are the free roaming method and the immunocontraception method. Nevada is home to nearly half of the nation's wild horses (7), and the Departments of Interior and Agriculture need to manage and protect the wild horses that reside on public land stated by the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 (1). The objectives of this study are to obtain articles about the management of wild horses from previous studies, specifically look at Carson City and the community opinion about the wild horse management in that area, and then from the opinions and research, conclude what is the preferred management strategy for the rangeland, community, and the horses. The main focus of this study is to see what the community thinks about the way the horses are being managed with the free roaming method and the birth control method. The birth control method (Porcine Zona Pellucida or PZP) lasts for two years (3). The free roaming method will be cooperatively managed by the BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, the Air Force, and the Department of Defense (2). It was found from reading several articles about the Deer Run Road horses that the opinions in the comments that were coded go from anger and disgust to annoyed with then BLM and the government, to extremely happy that the horses were adopted (9,10). It was concluded that the wild horses are creating strain on the rangelands and that the BLM is spending over \$74 million to transport them (5, 6). The most positive reactions came from the article "Deer Run group adopts Carson City wild horses removed from BLM" (10). There were a few additional areas that deserve attention if there was more time for the project. These are the development, distribution, and analyzation of surveys to obtain first had opinions from the local community stakeholders. This would be beneficial to accurately identify local sentiment and preference(s). It would also be beneficial for future research to identify and approach different case sites with more accessible information.

Introduction and Literature Review

There are two types of management styles on which this study will focus. One is letting the horses run free on managed public lands. The other is immunocontraception, also known as the birth control method. Both of these types of management styles will be reviewed in this paper.

Management of horse herds on public land essentially allows the horses to be free. This creates a need to actively manage herd sizes. The Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro act of 1971 gives the right to management and protection of wild horses who reside on public land to the Departments of Interior and Agriculture (1). There have been areas around the West that have been created to accommodate the wild horse herds and the people in neighboring communities who are unhappy with the herds. Some of these areas are cooperatively managed by the Bureau of Land Management (B.L.M.), Federal Fish and Wildlife Service, the United States Air Force, and the Department of Defense (2).

There have also been trials with the birth control method called immunocontraception. This method requires horses to be captured and injected with porcine zona pellucida (PZP) and then released back into the wild. A study of this birth control method conducted between 2001 and 2004 found that the PZP vaccine- a primary injection paired with PZP controlled-release polymer pellets- was an effective contraceptive for two years (3). This method is used to control herd sizes to decrease deterioration of range resources associated with herd overpopulation (4). When herds are actively managed the animals have higher rates of survival and they thrive but it also saves the land and the resources that the land provides.

As expected, there is some controversy about how the wild horses should be managed. In an article written by Lisa Meyers and Michael Austin titled “Cruel or Necessary? The True Cost of Wild Horse Roundups”, the authors suggest that while horses may be wild, they are not free. With nearly 50,000 horses living in captivity and only 32,000 remaining on the range, the authors note that both critics and supporters of the roundups agree that the “BLM’s Wild Horse and Burrow Program is out of control and heading for crisis” found on the first page of Meyers and Austin’s article. On page two of this same article the BLM and the head of the Wild Horse and Burro Program Joan Guilfoyle state that there is an excess of 7,831 horses (5). This excess puts too much strain on the rangelands and if the roundups/gatherings stopped the land would be overgrazed and the resources diminished. Critics suggest that the PZP injections have not been as successful as they hoped so the gatherings and relocation of the horses is what needs to be done to save the land (see Meyers and Austin’s article). In the same article Meyers and Austin discuss the “Slaughter Solution” and quote Guilfoyle as stating that the BLM would not consider allowing wild horses to be sold for slaughter and that “they never have and they never will” send horses to slaughter, which is mentioned at the end of the article (5). Contradictory to this statement, records show that the agency considered slaughter in October 2012 when the idea was floated by BLM advisory board member Jim Stephenson at a meeting in Salt Lake City (5).

The literature contains many articles suggesting that wild horse population growth is out-of-hand and that wild horses must be managed. In his article, “The West is on the brink of a wild horse apocalypse. (No, really.)”, Plumer mentions how the ideal population size should be around

23,622 head while there is currently an estimated 32,000-33,000 horses roaming freely on public lands in the western United States. Managing the population has been a struggle for the BLM because there are only a few thousand people that want to adopt the wild horses each year and as well as the Congressional restriction on the slaughter of healthy horses, this statement is found in the third paragraph of Plumer's article from 2013 (6). These limitations require the BLM to round up excess horses and ship them to long term retirement facilities, primarily private ranches in Kansas and Oklahoma. The great expense of this solution incites controversy and has increased the horse management budget within the BLM from \$19.8 million in 2000 to \$74.9 million in 2012 (6). This is costing the government and taxpayers tons of money and this is where the problem is created.

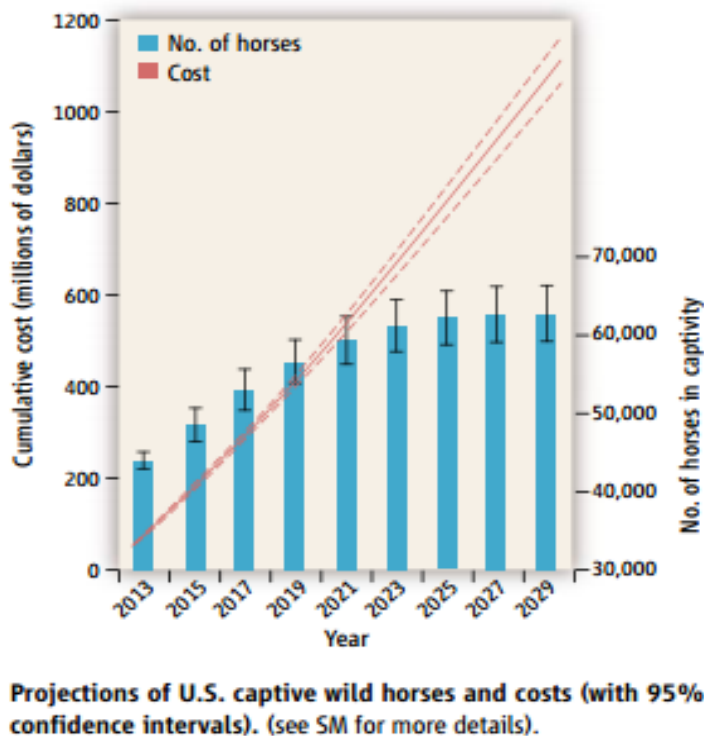


Figure 1: Projections of U.S captive wild horses and costs (6).

In Garrott and Oil (mentioned in Plumer 2013), the authors predict that the BLM will have to spend around \$1.1 billion over the next 17 years to keep storing horses in long term facilities, as depicted in Figure 1. If, instead, the BLM ceased the gatherings, the fear of the horse population getting out of hand could become a reality as the population could “triple in size in just six to eight years” (6).

There is an extensive literature related to the controversy of managing wild horse herds in the United States. All articles chosen for use in this study focus on the controversy of gathering the excess wild horses and transporting them to long term facilities. The BLM suggests their agency utilizes this method to save the animals from depleting the rangelands on which they live as well as reduce the numbers of horses dying from starvation in a highly competitive range shared

with livestock (5). However, some members of the public suggest the method of gathering to be less than optimal, darkly describing the process of transporting the horses to facilities and rounding them up with “thundering choppers overhead [that] are driving the wild horses, many that appear terrified, toward a trap” (5). According to the American Wild Horse Preservation Center, the herd sizes are too large, and –using the BLM figures –the center estimated that 82.5 percent of the forage in wild horse herd management areas is actually reserved for livestock grazing, leaving only 17.5 percent for the horses themselves. So one way that would alleviate overcrowding would be to scale back the livestock grazing on public lands, but then this would bring up a controversial topic for ranchers who are also stakeholders in this issue (6). Wild horse populations must be managed. The U.S. government through the BLM must determine the method –whether it be spending millions of dollars to relocate the horses or culling the population –as the current overcrowded rangeland is not healthy for any of the animals involved. The BLM predicts that once the population is around 23,000, the adoption program and contraceptives would be able to keep the population at a sustainable level (6). Any method utilized to deliver this population reduction, however, will be met by resistance from one or more stakeholder groups. Controversy is inherent to the issue, but as time goes human stakeholders will adapt to any choice, whereas horse and livestock populations may inhumanely starve and die.



Figure 2: BLM Field Offices in the wild horse management areas (12).

Specifically, in Nevada there are six horse management areas (see Figure 2) that are managed by the field office or district where they are located. This form of management is the free roaming style where the horses are on public land. Nevada is home to nearly half of the nation’s wild horses (7). When the populations grow too large for the management areas the BLM gathers the excess horses and take them to the corral facilities where they are vaccinated, given food and water. Then follow a thirty day regime of training at which point they are considered “green broke” and are made available for adoption through the Adopt-A-Horse or Burro Program. They also use the immunocontraception method of wild horse management in Nevada. A ten year study found

that a form of the birth control that is a controlled-release component of the PZP in a polymer matrix can provide infertility equal to the two-injection PZP vaccine (8). In Nevada, workers deliver the PZP pellets to horses through a jab stick during routine gatherings when the horses are restrained in a field stock chute (8).

State	Horses	Burros	Total	Max. AML
Arizona	303	4,860	5,163	1,676
California	4,395	2,946	7,341	2,184
Colorado	1,415	0	1,415	812
Idaho	633	0	633	617
Montana	172	0	172	120
Nevada	27,599	2,611	30,210	12,800
New Mexico	175	0	175	83
Oregon	4,327	49	4,376	2,715
Utah	4,550	355	4,905	1,956
Wyoming	3,760	0	3,760	3,725
Total	47,329	10,821	58,150	26,688

Figure 3: Number of wild horses in each

state (13).

Case Study

Carson City, NV is the area chosen for this study. Narrowing down the search and data field was necessary for the time that has been allotted for this project. To illuminate the sentiment of the public in relation to horse management within this specific community, the research included a review of several online articles including all public comments attached to those articles. Articles were located via Google searches for specific key words suggested by the local Carson City BLM office staff obtained within brief interviews. The BLM staff also suggested specific local online news sites and social media accounts. Articles chosen are located within the public domain and the commenters –known as global stakeholders (defined as such because they cannot be identified as a resident of Nevada or Carson City yet still contribute their opinion to the general conversation and trend of the topic(s)) –speak freely about the wild horses and their treatment.

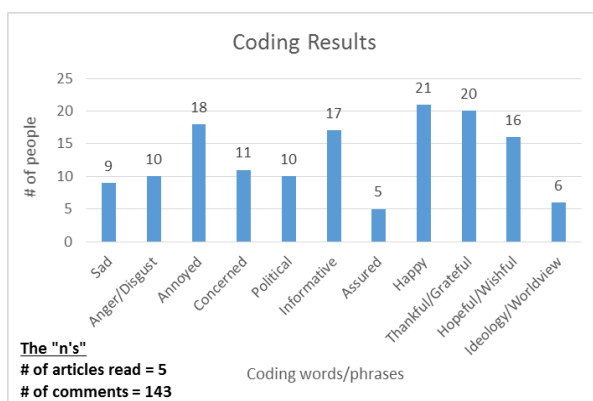


Figure 4: Coding results from articles read.

The majority of the comments coded for this case study did not reflect positively on the way the wild horses are being managed (see Figure 4). Most of the articles found for the Carson City, NV community centered on the capture and management of a specific small herd of wild horses located in the Deer Run/Pine Nut area. In an article titled “Carson City wild horse advocates speak out on BLM decision to trap Deer Run Road horses” the author discusses the unwillingness of the BLM to work with the community to keep a small herd of horses, which have been there for over 40 years, wild and free (9). Another article, “Deer Run group adopts Carson City wild horses removed from BLM”, adopts a more positive outlook for the small herd of horses that were captured. The author discusses the advocates who fought for the herd by collecting enough money to adopt the herd and transport them to a ranch in California to run and roam freely without interference (10). Though the Global stakeholders who commented on this article maintained a more positive trend and had a different outlook than stakeholder comments from other articles, there were still some expressing concern. In addition to articles about the small Deer Run herd that were captured and adopted, there were articles about local range management. There were many articles like the one titled “Carson City Range Management Plan- a Disaster for Our Wild Ones” suggest that most range land is set aside for the cattle and livestock grazing because they are profitable species, but horse populations are the ones that have to pay (11). Most of the articles that were read for this case study had a very negative view on the BLM and the way they manage/treat the wild horses in Carson City, approximately 60% of comments had something negative to say or mentioned what the BLM was doing.

Coding of the extensive comments attached to the articles chosen for this case study illustrate the community sentiment related to general horse management in the Carson City, NV area. It also includes the specific issue of the Deer Run herd. The chart above shows the coding key for words or phrases found within the comments. The numbers in the chart correspond to the real number of comments on all of the articles that fit in with those codes. The community sentiment suggested they were “very happy” and “thankful” when the advocates adopted and saved the Deer Run horse herd of mustangs. Approximately 18% of the comments were of an “informative” nature aimed at educating the community about BLM choices as they related to specific legislation, regulations, population health and other facts and figures. Additionally, 20% of the comments were coded as “annoyed” with the choices made and progress of the BLM management policy and practice as well as the government in general.

Though the original study suggested a discussion related to two specific forms of horse management based on the academic literature, a review of online articles and corresponding public discussions suggest that the active BLM management plan is something different. This ‘third option’ in practice using a bait and trap method of capture followed by transportation to long-term facilities appears to be the most common method of management in the Carson City, NV case study. As discovered through coding the comments in the public forum, this management practice is not well-supported by global stakeholders.

As evidenced in the public comments, there are a number of people who are unhappy with the BLM and their process of capturing and transporting the wild mustangs. There are many advocate groups and other stakeholders fighting for the horses. There are also ranchers and community

stakeholders speaking in support of the BLM and their practices. It appears both within the academic literature and popular online forums that all stakeholders agree that management of the wild horse herds is necessary (see 5, 6, 8, 11). However, the way that the BLM, specifically, chooses to manage those populations is likely to remain contentious. Comments were made that suggest the preference for reserving large amounts of land for cattle and livestock places horse herds in an unnecessarily challenging position given the very large tracts available. Perhaps a reduction in the acreage for livestock would remain adequate while enhancing the quality of life for wild horse herds (11).

Discussion

It was found that both the “roaming free on public land” and the immunocontraception method are used in Carson City, NV. From reading articles about the Carson City wild horse advocates speaking out on BLM’s decision to trap the Deer Run Road horses and how the advocates of Carson City then raised enough money to adopt the horses and take them to a sanctuary ranch in California so they can be free, it was found that the opinions in the comments go from anger and disgust to annoyed with the BLM and government to extremely happy that they horses were adopted (9,10). The data that was found shows the extreme array of opinions from global stakeholders, some support the BLM, some are against the BLM and there is little fear in sharing direct opinions.

In most of the articles that were read and coded results suggested that the majority of the opinions stated were in favor of the free roaming method. There were however a few opposing opinions that pointed to the destruction of rangeland and limited humane approaches to management of the horse populations. Based on these results, it appears that setting aside smaller sections of land for cattle and livestock and giving the horses more room to run would be preferable among vocal global stakeholders.

Conclusion

It was concluded that the wild horses are creating strain on the rangelands and the BLM is spending over \$74 million to move them (5,6). This money could be used to put up fencing to keep the horses in the areas where they need to be. If the money was used for fencing this could have helped with the Deer Run Road case (9).

Also that the most positive reactions and opinions came from the article “Deer Run group adopts Carson City wild horses removed from BLM” (10). Almost all of the other articles like “Carson City wild horse advocates speak out on BLM decision to trap Deer Run Road horses” and “Carson City Range Management Plan- a Disaster for our Wild Ones” had very negative opinions about the BLM and government interference with the wild horse herds (9,11).

After all the work that was put into this study there are some additional areas that deserve further attention. For example developing, distributing and analyzing surveys to obtain first hand opinions from the local community stakeholders would be very beneficial in accurately identifying local sentiment and preference(s). It would be better to know what the immediate community opinion is instead of using global stakeholders. Also, future research may benefit from identifying

and approaching different case sites with more accessible information. Carson City area only touched on a few points of concern like the Deer Run Road case and the management of the rangeland, it could be beneficial to research somewhere else and see if there is more concern somewhere else.

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