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RANGE is an award-winning quarterly devoted to the issues that threaten the West, its people, lifestyles, lands and wildlife. No stranger to controversy, *RANGE* is a leading forum for opposing viewpoints in the search for solutions that will halt the depletion of a national resource—the American cowboy.

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Up Front

Who's going to suffer?

By C.J. Hadley

There is some truth out there, but it's hard to find on the Internet. And there is a serious problem in the West, because feral horse herds can double every four years.

When the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses & Burros Act passed in 1971 (see Mustang Special Report), it included: "Excess animals must be removed to preserve and maintain a thriving ecological balance.... [The Secretary of Interior] shall determine whether appropriate management levels should be achieved by the removal or destruction of excess animals.... Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize the Secretary to relocate wild free-roaming horses or burros to areas of the public lands where they do not presently exist."

A wild-horse advocate/observer at the Twin Peaks gather north of Susanville, Calif., last September had several cameras rolling when the helicopter brought a group of horses into the trap. Any images that make the Bureau of Land Management look bad are on the blogs by nightfall and on their way around the globe to encourage more breast-clutching donors to "Help save the wild horses." Captions include words like "stampede," "driven to extinction" and "bloody noses," even though close to a quarter-million excess horses have already been gathered safely by the BLM (with most adopted out). There are 35,000 horses in permanent or temporary holding facilities and an estimated 37,000 still out on the range. The BLM says there's only room for 27,000.

Back in 1971, there were 17,000 free-roaming horses and 10,000 burros (most in Nevada), and they were managed by ranchers at no cost to taxpayers. The law said they were supposed to stay at the same numbers and on the same ranges, but nature doesn't cull 20 percent of a herd every year, which is needed to stay even. Horses enjoy walkabout, can travel up to 50 miles a day, and can destroy what they need, because they are too many.

Madeleine Pickens has always wanted to help save the mustangs. She has bought "a massive ranch" in Elko County, Nev. (see page M13) and is working with the BLM to take in 1,000 captive horses for a pilot program. A March 2009 agency press release states: "Last

November [2008], Mrs. Pickens offered to take over the care of thousands of wild horses that the BLM holds in facilities across the United States by setting up a private foundation that would care for the animals at no cost to the government, potentially saving American taxpayers millions of dollars. Mrs. Pickens' more recent proposal seeks a BLM stipend of \$500 per horse, per year, for the life of each horse. Under this plan, Mrs. Pickens' foundation would first take about 10,000 wild horses currently in BLM short-term holding facilities."

Pickens' newest plan (September 2010) proposes to take animals from private pastures and facilities and instead graze them on private and public lands. And she expects to get paid. She doesn't seem to care if rural Nevadans get screwed and wants historic livestock permits changed to horse permits. This puts the BLM in a fix: "Federal law prohibits the BLM from using allotments associated with cattle or sheep for grazing wild horses."

In October 2010, Mrs. Pickens' nonprofit foundation, Saving America's Mustangs, claimed it would "provide for the custody of up to 10,000 wild horses...and for the handling of additional wild horses [to be] gathered..." She thinks 4,000 more horses per year would be a nice addition and claims her horses will be "nonreproducing." Local experts say that her ranch, public and private, can hold less than 1,000 horses year-round. A gather is already scheduled to take off 2,000 excess mustangs from Pickens' neighborhood in January 2011 because the herd management area is three to four times over its appropriate management level. If the horses aren't moved, the BLM says the resource will be damaged and other wildlife and livestock will be in trouble.

Trout Unlimited backs the BLM, saying there should be "no special designations that elevate wild horse and burro herds above other multiple uses of public lands." TU members worry that too many horses will affect big game animals and about potential impacts of overgrazing on riparian habitats and threatened or endangered species.

"People who want every horse left out there just don't understand nature and don't care about fair play," says 88-year-old rancher Don Coops, who's spent most of his life on the range. "Horses multiply rapidly. They paw the water and churn up the mud. They hurt things. They like cool, high-country forage but stay too long and destroy it. Water holes dry up in summer and everything suffers."

There is no danger of feral horses becoming extinct on the ranges of the American West. The real danger is not to do what's right.