

An already-dire situation for America's Wild Horses could get worse and calls for united support.

by Neda DeMaayo

As we enter 2017, there's every reason to be concerned about the fate of the estimated 67,000 wild horses and burros on the range and 45,600 in government holding facilities.

The Bureau of Land Management program responsible for their welfare has said the situation on the range is dire, yet it did not ask for a budget increase. The independent advisory board intended to help guide that program called for euthanasia of wild horses in holding and the lowering of sales restrictions.



At the same time, some in the West want public land handed over to states that afford the wild horses on that land fewer protections – and back east, in Washington, D.C., a new presidential administration took power last month having said little of the debate over public land and nothing of the wild horses and burros that live on it.

Yet, we at Return to Freedom remain determined – even cautiously optimistic – as we face the future.

We feel that way because Americans have time and again rallied to support wild horses and burros.

For example: Last year, when that advisory board voted 8-1 to call for euthanasia of captured wild horses, RTF and other organizations gathered tens of thousands of signatures on petitions condemning that vote. BLM responded with a statement distancing itself from the

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recommendation within hours.

Know that RTF will never waiver on the need to end helicopter roundups. Nor will we budge on the need for strengthening anti-slaughter laws and regulations. We will participate in legal action when necessary and hold government agencies accountable for the handling and managing of our wild horses and burros.

Yet, we believe we cannot spend 2017 in a defensive crouch.

Instead, we must do our part to bring Americans together, pushing harder than ever to replace a broken, costly system of roundups and long-term holding with solutions that can provide the sustainable future on the range deserved by our wild horses and burros.

With you at our side, RTF will continue to advocate for solutions like the judicious use of proven, humane fertility control vaccines (our sanctuary was home to the fourth project of this kind), incentivizing the reduction of cattle and sheep grazing on public land, and creating cooperative programs with ranchers, sanctuaries and private citizens in order to reduce pressure on the range.

We will do more than show voters how their tax dollars are being used through coverage of roundups aimed at increased transparency and accountability; we will encourage the public to attend those roundups and provide them with more tools that enable them to grow as educated advocates.

We will also work diligently to grow our community of wild horse supporters by reaching out to generations of young Americans who, sadly, often don't know that wild horses still exist, much less need protecting.

We will tell them: As Americans, we have inherited our shared public lands and, with it, the responsibility to work together to care for the natural resources, wildlife – including horses and burros – and habitat on those lands.

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Horses originated on this continent and were reintroduced before the birth of the United States. The wild horses of today are the descendants of Spanish Colonial horses, Indian ponies, cavalry horses, and workhorses so integral to our country's history and vital to its spirit and western heritage.

Together, we must spread that story of our wild horses far and wide – telling it to one neighbor, one reporter, one lawmaker at a time – and show that there is a sensible, nonpartisan, and, above all, humane path to ensuring that our wild horses and burros remain free.

We must say with one voice: America has always been—and should always be— a Wild Horse Nation.

Thank you for standing with us,

-Neda DeMayo and the RTF Team

Author Neda DeMayo is founder of Return to Freedom: America's Wild Horse Sanctuary in Lompoc. For more information, including events and opportunities to visit, go to www.returntofreedom.org.