



News from the
Committee on Natural Resources
Rep. Nick J. Rahall, II - Chairman

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Statement of U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall, II
Chairman, Committee on Natural Resources
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Legislative Hearing
The Restore Our American Mustangs Act (H.R. 1018)
March 3, 2009

Thank you Chairman Grijalva.

H.R. 1018 is legislation that is long overdue. It will amend the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 – the landmark legislation that first recognized the importance of wild horses and burros to our American culture, and sought to prevent them from disappearing from the western range altogether.

The 1971 Act rightly declared that wild free-roaming horses and burros embody “the pioneer spirit of the West” and “enrich the lives of the American people.”

Since passage of this principled legislation, however, the Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency charged with the stewardship of these iconic creatures, has struggled to uphold the vision of the 1971 Act. Under funding and charges of mismanagement have plagued the program and undermined the intent of the law.

The Act originally identified 53 million acres of public land on which wild horses and burros could roam freely; the BLM has since removed horses and burros from nearly 19 million of those acres. Further, since 1971, more than 200,000 wild horses and burros have been rounded up from public lands and either adopted or placed in long-term holding facilities. And of critical concern, the BLM recently announced that, due to a combination of a lack of funding, facilities and options, they may be required to kill as many as 30,000 healthy wild horses and burros.

Something is obviously broken here.

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Protection and management of the wild horses and burros on our public lands is an important federal responsibility – but it is clear that the federal government has not been adequately meeting that responsibility. We can and must do better.

The ROAM Act is intended to help the BLM do better. It is designed to provide land managers a broad array of tools with which to maintain healthy, thriving herds of wild horses and burros so that they may roam public lands, and remain, as the 1971 Act said, “an integral part of the natural system of the public lands.”

A 2008 report by the Government Accountability Office that I requested identified a number of deficiencies plaguing the BLM wild horse and burro program and made recommendations on how to improve the management of the Program. The ROAM Act includes those GAO recommendations.

It also expands the areas available for wild horses and burros to roam in order to provide BLM needed flexibility in maintaining healthy herds on public lands. The bill requires the process for estimating the number of wild horses and burros on our public lands, and for managing these herds, to be more scientific, more consistent and more transparent.

Finally, the ROAM Act specifically prohibits the killing of healthy, wild horses and burros.

I would like to offer my personal gratitude to the witnesses who have joined us today to testify on this measure. Mrs. Madeleine Pickens continues her work as an advocate for animal welfare and is to be commended for her tireless engagement in this very important issue.

I also want to welcome Mr. Wayne Pacelle of the Humane Society of the United States and Mr. D.J. Schubert of the Animal Welfare Institute. Both of your organizations have been leading the charge to raise awareness of the plight of our wild horses and burros, and you all have been instrumental in your advocacy on their behalf and in our legislative efforts here today.

I thank Chairman Grijalva for holding this hearing today, and I look forward to this opportunity to work towards improving conditions for America’s iconic wild and free-roaming horses and burros.