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News Release

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Salazar Seeks Congressional Support for Sustainable National Program to Manage Iconic Wild Horses

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today proposed a national solution to restore the health of America's wild horse herds and the rangelands that support them by creating a cost-efficient, sustainable management program that includes the possible creation of wild horse preserves on the productive grasslands of the Midwest and East.

"The current path of the wild horse and burro program is not sustainable for the animals, the environment, or the taxpayer," Salazar said in a [letter](#) outlining his proposals to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and eight other key members of Congress with jurisdiction over wild horse issues. Salazar said he is "proposing to develop new approaches that will require bold efforts from the Administration and from Congress to put this program on a more sustainable track, enhance the conservation for this iconic animal, and provide better value for the taxpayer."

Bob Abbey, Director of Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), commended the Secretary for his initiative, saying, "The proposals we are unveiling today represent a forward-looking, responsive effort to deal with the myriad challenges facing our agency's wild horse and burro program." Abbey added, "We owe wild horses and burros on Western rangelands high-quality habitat. We owe the unadopted wild horses and burros in holding good care and treatment. And we owe the American taxpayer a well-run, cost-effective wild horse program. Today's package of proposals will achieve those ends."

The challenges to the BLM associated with maintaining robust wild horse populations in the West have been recognized by the Senate Appropriations Committee, which has warned that gathering and holding costs have risen beyond sustainable levels and directed the BLM to prepare a long-term plan for the program. The Government Accountability Office also found the program to be at a "critical crossroads," affirmed the need to control off-the-range holding costs, and recommended that the BLM work with Congress to find a responsible way to manage the increasing number of unadopted horses. In response to Congressional direction, Salazar's proposals aim to achieve a "truly national solution" to a traditionally Western issue.

In four decades under the BLM's protection, wild horses that were fast disappearing from the American scene have returned to rapid growth. "As wild horses have no natural predators and herds grow quickly," Salazar said in his letter, "more than 33,000 wild horses live in 10 western states. Unfortunately, arid western lands and watersheds cannot support a population this large without significant damage to the environment."

The BLM works to achieve an ecological balance on the range by removing thousands of wild horses and burros from public rangelands each year and then offering them for adoption. Unadopted animals are cared for in short-term corrals and long-term pastures. With the sharp decline in wild horse adoptions in recent years because of the economic downturn, the Bureau now maintains nearly 32,000 wild horses and burros in holding, including more than 9,500 in expensive short-term corrals. In Fiscal Year 2008, the cost of holding and caring for these animals exceeded \$27 million – or three-fourths of the FY 2008 enacted funding level of \$36.2 million for the entire wild horse and burro

program. In the most recent fiscal year (2009), which ended September 30, holding costs were approximately \$29 million, or about 70 percent of the total 2009 enacted wild horse and burro program budget of \$40.6 million.

A key element of the Secretary's plan, designed to address concerns raised by the Senate Appropriations Committee and the Government Accountability Office, would designate a new set of wild horse preserves across the nation. Citing limits on forage and water in the West because of persistent drought and wildfire, Salazar said the lands acquired by the BLM and/or its partners "would provide excellent opportunities to celebrate the historic significance of wild horses, showcase these animals to the American public, and serve as natural assets that support local tourism and economic activity." The wild horse herds placed in these preserves would be non-reproducing.

In his letter, Salazar also proposed:

Managing the new preserves either directly by the BLM or through cooperative agreements between the BLM and private non-profit organizations or other partners to reduce the Bureau's off-the-range holding costs. This coordinated effort would harness the energy of wild horse and burro supporters, whose enthusiasm would also be tapped to promote wild horse adoptions at a time when adoption demand has softened.

Showcasing certain herds on public lands in the West that warrant distinct recognition with Secretarial or possibly congressional designations. These would highlight the special qualities of America's wild horses while generating eco-tourism for nearby rural communities.

Applying new strategies aimed at balancing wild horse and burro population growth rates with public adoption demand. This effort would involve slowing population growth rates of wild horses on Western public rangelands through the aggressive use of fertility control, the active management of sex ratios on the range, and perhaps even the introduction of non-reproducing herds in some of the BLM's existing Herd Management Areas in 10 Western states. The new strategies would also include placing more animals into private care by making adoptions more flexible where appropriate.

Noting that his proposals are subject to Congressional approval and appropriations, Salazar said he and Director Abbey look forward to discussing them with members of Congress "as we work together to protect and manage America's 'Living Legends.'"

A copy of the letter is online at www.doi.gov and can be found [here](#). For background information on the national wild horse and burro program, please visit the BLM's Website at www.blm.gov.

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THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

OCT 07 2009

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Leader:

I am writing to enlist your help to better protect the wild horses that are proud symbols of America's heritage and to better manage the open lands on which they roam.

Since 1971, when Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management has proudly managed the Nation's wild horses and burros. In four decades under the BLM's protection, wild horse populations that were once "fast disappearing from the American scene" have returned to rapid growth.

Now, wild horse herds and the landscapes on which they live face new challenges. As wild horses have no natural predators, the herds have grown substantially. The total wild horse and burro population is now approximately 69,000. This number includes approximately 37,000 currently roaming the public land, and approximately 32,000 held in expensive short-term corrals and long-term pastures. By contrast, in 1971 the total population was approximately 25,000.

Population increases have resulted in steadily increasing program costs – from \$38.8 million in Fiscal Year 2007, to \$53 million in Fiscal Year 2009, to a budget request of \$69 million for Fiscal Year 2010.

Additionally, arid western lands and watersheds cannot support a population this large without significant damage to the environment. To prevent starvation of animals and to protect the lands from over-grazing, the BLM each year moves thousands of wild horses to short-term corrals and long-term pastures.

The current path of the wild horse and burro program is not sustainable for the animals, the environment, or the taxpayer. The Government Accountability Office noted in a recent report that the wild horse and burro program is at a "critical crossroads," affirmed the need for action to control off-range holding costs, and recommended that the BLM work with Congress to find a responsible way to manage the increasing number of unadopted horses. The Senate Committee on Appropriations Report for the Department's Fiscal Year 2010 budget noted that gathering and holding costs "have risen beyond sustainable levels" and directed the BLM to prepare a long-term plan for the program.

To respond to these challenges, I am proposing to develop new approaches that will require bold efforts from the Administration and from Congress to put this program on a more sustainable track, enhance the conservation for these iconic animals, and provide better value for the taxpayer.

First, I propose that the United States establish a new set of wild horse preserves across the Nation, particularly on the productive grasslands of the Midwest and in the East. We must consider siting these preserves in areas outside the Western States because water and forage are extremely limited in the West, and drought and wildfire threaten both rangeland and animal health. These new preserves would be located on lands (or interests in lands) acquired by the BLM, and/or partners, and would be home to non-reproducing herds of wild horses. They would provide excellent opportunities to celebrate the historic significance of wild horses, showcase these animals to the American public, and serve as natural assets that support local tourism and economic activity.

The national wild horse preserves would be managed by the BLM or through cooperative agreements between the BLM and private non-profit organizations or other partners, thereby reducing our existing off-range holding costs and harnessing the considerable energy of our most enthusiastic wild horse supporters. We would also explore the availability of new grazing areas that could accommodate a large number of wild horses and could be managed through partnerships with existing conservation programs. Partners could also contribute to the wild horse and burro program by promoting adoptions.

Second, to showcase the unique herds on public lands in the West that deserve special recognition, I propose to highlight those special herds with Secretarial or possibly Congressional designations. Special designations would highlight the unique qualities of America's wild horses, providing a focal point for publicity and increased eco-tourism that could boost the economies of nearby rural communities.

Finally, I propose new strategies to ensure that the herds on our western rangelands are kept at more sustainable levels. We must balance population growth rates with adoption demand. Only by reducing breeding populations of wild horses on western rangelands will this program come into balance. This will require the aggressive use of fertility control, active management of sex ratios on the range, and possibly the introduction of non-reproducing herds in some existing herd management areas. At the same time, we must also place more animals into good homes by making our adoptions more flexible where appropriate.

These proposals set forth my vision for responding to Congress and GAO's direction to address the many challenges facing the wild horse and burro program. I am confident that these measures can provide a truly national solution to a concern that is not limited to the West. They will restore balance and health to our wild horse and burro herds, improve the management of the program, promote rangeland health, and create a lasting conservation legacy for these iconic animals.

These proposals are subject to Congressional approval and appropriations. I look forward to discussing them with you and other members of Congress as we work together to protect and manage America's "Living Legends."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Salazar". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "K" and a long, horizontal stroke for the "z".

Ken Salazar

Identical letters have been sent to:

The Honorable Jeff Bingaman
Chairman, Committee on Energy and
Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member, Committee on
Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nick J. Rahall
Chairman, Committee on Natural
Resources
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Doc Hastings
Ranking Member, Committee on Natural
Resources
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
Chairman, Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Norman D. Dicks
Chairman, Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Simpson
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515