



Economic Impact of Excess Wild Horses on BLM Grazing Allotments in Rio Blanco County

Jenny Beiermann, Norman Dalsted, Jeffrey E. Tranel, R. Brent Young¹

September 2017

In 1971, the Wild Horse and Burro Act was passed by Congress to protect, manage, and control wild horses and burros in ten Western States. These horses and burros are feral, meaning that they are non-native to the land they inhabit in North America. As of March 1, 2017, there are 72,674 head of free-roaming, feral horses, and another 44,640 head in holding and training facilities (BLM, 2017). Those numbers do not include this year's foal crop, meaning this number has increased since the count taken in March 2017. National herd sizes, from 2015 to 2016, increased by 15 percent, and increased by 8 percent from 2016 to 2017. The BLM estimates that horse and burro herds double in size about every four to five years.

Herd Management Areas (HMA's), are established for the management of wild horse and burro herds. As of March 1, 2017, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has 177 HMA's across the ten states where they manage these horses and Burros. Four HMA's are located in western Colorado, one of them being in Rio Blanco County. The BLM is responsible for developing a Herd Management Area Plan (HMAP) for each HMA. The management plan for each is different due to the vast differences in the land and climates, and each plan is designed to manage excess horse populations in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). In

each plan an appropriate management level (AML) is established for the herd, as well as their other habitat requirements, all in accordance with the multiple use mandate. Title 43 § 4720.1 of the CFR states:

Upon examination of current information and a determination by the authorized officer that an excess of wild horses or burros exists, the authorized officer shall remove the excess animals immediately in the following order.

(a) Old, sick, or lame animals shall be destroyed in accordance with subpart 4730 of this title;

(b) Additional excess animals for which an adoption demand by qualified individuals exists shall be humanely captured and made available for private maintenance in accordance with subpart 4750 of this title; and

(c) Remaining excess animals for which no adoption demand by qualified individuals exists shall be destroyed in accordance with subpart 4730 of this title.

As of March 2017, the national free roaming wild horse and burro population exceeds the total AML by almost 47,000 head.

¹ Beiermann, Tranel, and Young are Agricultural and Business Management Economists with Colorado State University Extension and faculty affiliates with the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics. Dalsted is a Professor and Agricultural and Business Management Economist in Colorado State University's Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Extension. Beiermann can be contacted at jenny.beiermann@colostate.edu.

Rio Blanco County is also home to abundant wildlife populations, boasting the largest herds of elk and deer in Colorado (Rio Blanco County Land and Natural Resource Plan and Policies, 2016). With so much wildlife, and excess wild horses, using the public land, conflicts have arisen with agricultural producers who also use the land to graze their cattle. Consequently, much of the forage on public land has been depleted, forcing ranchers who use the land to forgo turning a portion of their cattle out to graze. Current wild horse and burro herd management options are not able to keep up with the rising herd numbers. Because of the lack of adoptions and expense of caring for the excess animals when removed from the range, BLM has chosen to leave the excess horses on the range, causing overpopulation in and outside of the HMA's.

Rio Blanco County has one HMA, the Piceance-East Douglas HMA. On this HMA, the AML is set at 135-235 head of wild horses. The last time a count was performed on the HMA in 2015, there were 377 head of horses in the area, clearly over the AML limit. It is estimated that the herd growth rate of this HMA is 20% annually (Rio Blanco County Land and Natural Resource Plan and Policies, 2016). There are also two herd areas in the county, which were determined to be unsuitable for horse management and were given an AML of zero. Although the herd areas were to be zeroed out, both have wild horse populations. It is estimated that 270 horses remain in these two herd areas (Rio Blanco County Land and Natural Resource Plan and Policies, 2016). Due to this overpopulation, rangeland is being degraded, wildlife is being impacted, and livestock grazing numbers are being reduced.

As a result of these large herd populations, and potential wildlife factors, many ranchers have had to reduce their number of cattle grazing on the same land as the wild horses because the range cannot support both excess horses and allotted cattle. This reduction is causing economic losses to the producers, as well as to the local economy, because some ranchers face a

constraint on the number of livestock. In Rio Blanco County, there are 1,460,013 acres of BLM land permitted for livestock grazing. There are 105,362 AUMs held in active permits, and 15,179 AUMs are currently under suspension. The productivity of the grazing allotments, according to the CSU Extension Dryland Pasture Condition Assessment publication, is estimated to be 0.12 AUM's/acre, meaning there are 8.3333 acres needed to support 1 AUM, or 1 cow and her calf, for 1 month. Assuming the cattle graze for a 4 month period, the suspended AUMs could support 3,794 AUMs. Assuming a 3% death loss of the calf crop, that reduces the AUMs by 114, to 3,680. If half of the calf crop are steers and the other half are heifers, that is 1,840 steers and 1,840 heifers. With steers bringing \$1.50 per lb. and heifers bringing \$1.40 per lb., the steer crop, at 500 lbs. per head, would generate \$1,417,500 (1840 AUMs*500 cwt.*\$1.50/lb.) in gross income. The heifers, at 450 lbs. per head would generate \$1,159,200 in gross income (1840 AUMs*450 cwt.*\$1.40/lb.). Adding those together, producers in Rio Blanco County are forgoing \$2,576,700 in gross income annually, assuming they are fully dependent on federal grazing lands. These numbers do not include those ranchers in the county who have been taking voluntary non-use of their allotted AUM's on grazing permits for over 30 years due to lack of available forage.

Additionally, the reduction heavily impacts the local economy. According the USDA census of Agriculture, livestock sales in Rio Blanco County were \$20,452,000 and there were a total of 24,575 cattle and calves in the county. Cattle and calves accounted for \$17,073,000 of those sales, meaning that each cow sold contributed \$694.73 to the local economy (Rio Blanco County Land and Natural Resource Plan and Policies, 2016). The Bureau of Economic Analysis identified the multiplier for the agricultural industry to be between 2.14 and 2.65. Using a mid-range multiplier of 2.4, and assuming that the ranchers were able to graze the suspended 3,680 AUMs, those cattle would contribute a total of

\$6,184,080 additional dollars to the local economy annually.
