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A passionate group of Arizona conservationists is fighting to keep the **Salt River Wild Horses** alive. But the conflict is merely a local manifestation of a much wider debate that is currently raging throughout the American West: What do we do with all the wild horses?

## DEATH NOTE

It was on July 31 that one of Simone Netherlands' worst fears suddenly and unexpectedly became reality. That was the day that the **United States Forest Service** (USFS) gave public notice of their intention to dispose of the Salt River Wild Horses that roam the southern border of Tonto National Forest. The notice said that any horses not claimed as private property by August 7 would be rounded up and either sold or "condemned and destroyed."

As the president of the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group, Ms. Netherlands had been intimately involved in protecting and preserving the herd of about 100 animals for years. The nonprofit had ongoing contact and a good working relationship with the USFS. The situation was a total surprise. At a small press event immediately afterward, board members took a moment to observe the imperiled animals as they had so many times before.

"We were filming the horses and frankly, we were all crying," Ms. Netherlands said. "These were horses that we'd all followed since they were born. We did not know if that was the last footage we would ever take of them. We knew it would take unprecedented outrage from the public to save them."

Unprecedented outrage is what they got.

As word spread via social media and local news, so did public opposition, but authorities stood firm. **The Tonto National Forest** told a Phoenix CBS affiliate that the only thing that could keep the horses on the land would be "an act of Congress."

The second press conference was much bigger, drawing more than 100 protesters and plenty of local media. During the event, a lawyer notified the public of his intention to file a federal injunction to prevent the roundup. Elaborate promises of civil disobedience were made in which 200 people, mounted on both horseback and motorcycles, would ride out to physically prevent government agents from seizing the horses. Wild horse advocates were preparing for a showdown.

Forest Service spokesperson Chandler Mundy acknowledged that it was a touchy subject, but urged the public to consider the reasons for the roundup. "Our phones are ringing off the hook," Mr. Mundy said. "We understand the emotion tied to the horses. We want to stress that they are a safety concern to us. People are camping here, they're picnicking here, and these horses are untamed animals. People are treating them like they are domestic, gentle pets, but at any moment somebody could get kicked, bit, stampeded. It's a problem waiting to happen."

Conservationists contend that **Butcher Jones**, the recreation area where the horses come into closest contact with the public, is not their home range. They say that the horses have been forced closer to the public as their usual water sources have dried up. As soon as water is replenished, they believe the horses will head back into the forest. More to the point, they claim that not one single injury has ever occurred from a wild horse in the history of Tonto National Forest.

## HOW WILD IS WILD?

By the Monday before the roundup deadline, a **Change.org** petition to save the horses had 10,000 signatures. It reads in part:

*In 1971 the US Forest Service was mandated by the **Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act** to establish wild horse territories where wild horses and burros existed at that time. The Forest Service admits that the Salt River Wild Horses were present in and around the Salt River at that time, and many eyewitnesses and articles prove that fact, yet they did not create a territory for the herd. The reason for this has never been answered by the USFS.*

This is the heart of Ms. Netherlands' contention. Unfortunately, opinions about just how old this particular herd is differ wildly. Conservationists say the Salt River horses have been living wild since the days of the Spanish Conquistadors — well before 1971.

In its own defense, the USFS counters with a 1974 internal report that claims all of the horses observed in the previous year's survey had been branded by the two bordering Indian Reservations, and were therefore not wild. The report goes on to say that the brands were confirmed by reservation stockmen, and ends by noting, "We have previously reported horses using this area as being wild and free-roaming. Based on the above, this was in error. We have, therefore, not identified a 1971 Horse and Burro Territory in this area."

The Salt River Wild Horse Management group claims it has innumerable newspaper articles, photos and even eyewitnesses that prove indisputably the presence of wild horses in the area at the time, and that the herd should be given the official territory it was originally denied.

But being recognized as a wild horse territory under federal law may not be a silver bullet. Absent from this local discussion is the startling fact that a slaughter of wild horses 500 times larger than a Salt River roundup may be just over the horizon for the American West.

## LICENSE TO KILL

The most interesting portion of the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act is its opening: *That Congress finds and declares that wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; that they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people; and that these horses and burros are fast disappearing from the American scene. It is the policy of Congress that wild free-roaming horses and burros shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death; and to accomplish this they are to be considered in the area where presently found, as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands.*

The law stresses that an ecological and social balance be struck between wild horses and the landscape in which they live, mandating that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) limit herd sizes, adopting out as many rounded up horses as possible. At that time, there were only 25,000 animals across the West to manage. Today there are more than 80,000, and the population is growing faster than BLM can handle.

It turns out that not many people are interested in adopting or purchasing wild horses, leaving the agency overloaded with livestock. While there are still about 35,000 horses running free, about 50,000 are currently warehoused in BLM facilities, and there is simply no space or funding to hold any more. And yet, the agency is required by law to continue rounding up thousands every year at taxpayer expense.

Where will these horses end up?

The law technically allows BLM to slaughter all 50,000 of the animals outright, but meeting minutes show that the agency has been concerned that a popular outcry from animal rights activists and sympathizers might "threaten the safety of our facilities and our employees." They have opted for the politically safer policy of forcing each customer buying horses — few though they may be — to sign a contract pledging not to sell the animals for slaughter. This bought BLM a little time, but change may be right around the corner.

There is a growing chorus of voices in the West — comprised primarily of ranchers whose cattle share grazing lands with the wild herds — insisting that government agencies begin to sell the horses for slaughter. From a purely mathematical perspective, it's a win-win: populations would decrease to acceptable levels almost immediately, taxpayer money would no longer be spent warehousing 50,000 wild animals, and a substantial quantity of inexpensive meat and horsehide leather would hit the markets. The animals would have enjoyed a free-range life (literally) and experienced a humane slaughter.

But tallying the emotional and symbolic cost of such a slaughter is much more difficult. Anyone who watches horses rounded up by BLM ramming the pens, fighting desperately to get free, and being separated from their family members is likely to feel a little uneasy. Their identity as "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West" is difficult to quantify — abstract, but not imaginary.

Much to the horror of conservationists, things seem to be moving quickly in the direction of mass slaughter for horses housed in federal Horse and Burro Territories. The last meeting of BLM's advisory councils officially recommended that "due to drought and the increasing number of wild horses, lack of long term holding, and for the preservation of the range and humanitarian treatment of the horses, the BLM explore all options, including supporting gathers and the unconditional sale of wild horses to promote the goal of the sustainable wild horse population."

The key words there are "unconditional sale," which means that horses may be sold with a no-questions-asked policy. An individual could purchase one wild horse as a pet, or purchase 50 to sell to meat packing plants.

On the Christmas Eve preceding that council meeting, the Nevada Farm Bureau and several counties had finally sued BLM for mismanagement of wild horse populations. The lawsuit demands that the entire captive population of 50,000 horses be destroyed.

## MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

The Salt River Wild Horse Management Group has won, for now. The group's petition has garnered 120,000 online signatures in two weeks. Finally, just before the roundup deadline, the USFS agreed to postpone and "reexamine" their plans. Negotiations are continuing in good faith, but progress is slow. With no guarantee of safety in the long term, Ms. Netherlands and the many new volunteers of the Management Group remain vigilant. For now, voices like theirs are the only ones keeping wild horses alive. 🐾

| Kendall Perkinson couldn't be dragged away by wild horses.  
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