

TheMustangNation.com - Demands on the Land

This activity aligns with the following National Science Education Standards: Content Standard C: Life Science—Populations and Ecosystems Content Standard F: Science in Personal and Social Perspectives—Populations, Resources, and Environments; Science and Technology in Society

Introduction

Today, most American wild horses and burros are located in portions of the West on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Public lands also provide habitat for wildlife. In addition, BLM issues permits to ranchers to allow them to graze their livestock on public lands. Land managers strive to balance the various uses of the land while protecting the health of the rangelands. As the following activity demonstrates, this "balancing act" can be quite challenging.

To get a feel for the difficulties involved in making land-use decisions, conduct this role-playing activity. Students will research and debate the viewpoints of different interest groups regarding the removal of horses from a wild horse and burro Herd Management Area (HMA).

Procedure

1. Divide the class into five groups, each of which will represent one interest group.
2. Photocopy the position statements of each of the five interest groups shown below. (If possible, copy onto one sheet of legal size paper.) Cut apart each set of position statements and give one to each of the five student groups.
3. Read the background information aloud to the class. Then allow the remainder of the class period (or longer, if possible) for each group to prepare its arguments by doing further research in the library or on some of the websites listed in the article references.
4. Groups should each choose a spokesperson, who will make a presentation to the rest of the class. Each spokesperson has up to 10 minutes in which to outline the group's position. Appoint a timekeeper.
5. Following the presentations, allow a 30-minute period for questions and discussion. The class should then come up with a list of possible options. Through this activity, students should come to appreciate that each group represented has valid concerns and that each possible option presents its own set of complications. In addition, students should realize that positions expressed by most of these groups may or may not be based entirely on facts. As often happens with contentious issues, people can focus on certain facts and ignore others, or they can choose to believe some experts while disregarding others. Frequently, additional studies and research are needed. However, as the situation in this activity is presented—and as is often the case in reality— an emergency exists. A decision needs to be made quickly. Challenge students to try and think of a solution that could

address everyone's concerns. To conclude the activity, students should abandon their assigned roles and pretend they are public land managers. In this role, they should vote on what they think is the best option.

Background

Herd Management Area #45 is in trouble. Home to a herd of approximately 125 horses, the area supports nearly 900 cattle as well as numerous species of wildlife. Over the course of the past summer, there was very little rainfall. Several water holes dried up and a couple of streams were reduced to a trickle. The area's plants also suffered from a lack of precipitation. Even though they're drought resistant, Indian ricegrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, and other grasses that are favored by horses and cattle have died off early. And some of the heartier shrubs, such as winterfat and bitterbrush, are looking less than healthy. Land managers, who are responsible for protecting the wild horses, are concerned that the horses won't make it through the winter. To help them, managers propose to conduct an emergency gather of the wild horses. The proposal is to remove all but about 30 of the horses, take them to a temporary holding facility, and prepare them for adoption by private citizens. A public meeting is being held next week to debate this and other options. Various groups have been given permission to speak at the meeting.

Group Position Statements

(Note: Every effort has been made to represent accurately the positions of each interest group; however, opinions within each group do vary.)

Save a Living Legacy

This group has been active in the horse protection issue for decades. Members want to make sure that wild horses and burros are strongly protected and stay on the range. After all, these animals are part of America's "living legacy."

Position: BLM should not remove horses from the range.

Reasons:

- Too many wild horse herds have been "zeroed out" already. By removing this many horses, the long-term health of the herd will be threatened. If the number of breeding animals in an area grows too small, there's a danger that bad traits will be passed from one generation to the next, threatening the animal with extinction.
- There are too many wild horses waiting for adoption already. It's inhumane to leave horses in "temporary holding facilities" for too long. And when there are not enough adopters, that is what happens. Besides, it's very costly to keep so many horses in such facilities.

Suggested alternatives:

- Managers should provide temporary food and water to the horses to help them survive the winter. In addition, managers should make long-term habitat improvements by increasing forage and water supplies.

- Remove cattle to allow more forage for the horses. There are many more cattle than horses on the range. Cattle damage the range more than horses do, especially streamside areas. Besides, only a small percentage of the beef consumed in the United States comes from cattle grazing on public lands. Wild horses and the land are paying the price for preserving inefficient ranches; meanwhile, ranchers pay virtually nothing for the privilege of using public lands.

Ranchers for the Range

This organization of local cattle ranchers advocates progressive range management practices, and its members have cooperated with land managers to preserve forage and water. As they have for several generations, these ranchers depend heavily on public lands to graze their cattle.

Position: Removing the horses is a good idea.

Reasons:

- Horses compete with cattle for limited forage.
- Horses compete with cattle for water as well—and not just for natural water sources. Ranchers try to provide water to livestock in times of drought, but sometimes the wild horses take that, too.
- Public lands belong to everyone. The American consumer benefits from cattle grazing, and public lands should be managed for the benefit of people.
Suggested alternatives:
- Remove all the horses from the HMA permanently.
- Whatever is decided, there should not be any more limits on livestock. Ranchers have already rotated their cattle from place to place on the range and taken other measures to preserve forage. BLM gives in too often to the "No More Moo" movement.

Department of Fish and Wildlife

The State Department of Fish and Wildlife is charged with managing and conserving the state's wildlife resources.

Position: Remove horses and cattle from the range temporarily and perhaps even permanently.

Reasons:

- Adequate habitat (quality and quantity) is needed to maintain current population levels of wildlife in the area. If the horses remain on the range, that will be impossible.
- Protecting wild areas from all degradation is most important. No single use of the land should be allowed to deplete the overall health of the area. Horses are doing just that.
- Decisions should be based on science not politics, and much more complete and accurate information needs to be gathered.

- There aren't enough adopters to solve the problem of too many horses. BLM should spend less money on the adoption program and more money on research into fertility control, accurate counting methods, and habitat studies.

Suggested alternative:

- Let nature take its course. After all, during some periods of severe weather, the numbers of elk and antelope decline.

Tourist Board

Tourism in the area is increasing and the tourist board is interested in drawing more year-round visitors to the region, particularly those interested in hunting, horseback riding, and off-road vehicle use, including snowmobiling.

Position: Don't remove the horses or threaten the longterm health of the herd.

Reasons:

- Wildlife viewing opportunities are important, and to many tourists, wildlife includes wild horses. Protecting habitat for horses and other wildlife should result in increased tourism year-round.
- Increased tourism would provide more jobs for local folks. To enhance economic growth and stability in the community, recreation opportunities on public lands need to be enhanced and expanded.

Suggested alternatives:

- Ban cattle grazing. Cattle detract from the "wilderness experience" that draws many people to the area. Consider taking some of the cattle ranches and turning them into resorts, where tourists can come to experience all that nearby public lands have to offer.
- Provide food and water to the horses this winter.
- Make long-term habitat improvements, which should benefit all the wildlife in the area, including the wild horses. Better wildlife habitat should mean more deer, elk, and other game species, which should attract more hunters to the area, too.

State Department of Natural Resources

This government agency monitors the water quality of streams and rivers on land throughout the state. Agency experts have conducted extensive studies of the limited water resources in the area.

Position: It's a good idea to remove the horses.

Reasons:

- The cumulative effect of wild horses and livestock grazing near streams in the area is taking its toll. Water quality is deteriorating rapidly primarily because of erosion caused by too many horses and cattle.

- With a smaller number of horses in the area, water quality should improve.

Suggested alternatives:

- Consider removing both horses and cattle temporarily. While they're gone, fences can be erected to keep animals away from stream banks.
- When horses and livestock are allowed to return, BLM should set up watering and feeding stations throughout the herd management area—but away from natural water sources.

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