

Congress targets our wild horses



Let them roam (JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES)

BY

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
Wednesday, November 1,
2017, 5:00 AM

Special interests in the ranching, oil and gas and mining industries and the lawmakers who do their bidding have a nefarious but underreported agenda: to round up and destroy the wild horses and burros on America's public lands.

This is not the first time they've tried, but this time, the stars are aligned in the worst way, and they just might succeed.

First, some quick history. Back in the 1950s, wild horses were at the brink of extinction. They had no federal protections. People known as Mustangers were chasing, rounding up and selling them for slaughter by the thousands. Anyone who has seen the classic 1961 Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe film “The Misfits” has a sense — albeit a sanitized, Hollywood sense — of this dirty work.

That changed when activist Velma Johnston, famously known as Wild Horse Annie, inspired the passage of the Wild Horse Annie Act in 1959, which provided some protection for these animals. That law was followed by even stronger legislation — the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. It expressly prohibited the hunting, capture, injury and disturbance of wild horses and burros.

Over the years, however, lawmakers have chipped away at this legislation, removing many of its vital protections. Tremendous damage was done by the 2004 Burns Amendment; it passed without so much as a hearing and permitted the sale of these animals for commercial purposes. Many ended up at slaughter.

The biggest threat to wild horses today is a group of ranchers — known as “welfare ranchers” — who use federal lands to graze their cattle. They have made it clear that they want the horses and burros gone. They believe they are entitled to the land and water rights for their livestock.

Though they style themselves as independent pioneers, these ranchers are given huge subsidies by the federal government, enabling them to lease our public lands for a pittance, while the wild horses and burros are rounded up and sent to holding facilities operated by the Bureau of Land Management, a division of the the Interior Department.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, this program has cost the American taxpayer more than \$1 billion over the past decade and is “ruinous to the public lands and the wildlife that inhabit it.”

There is no doubt that our wild horses and burros can be managed humanely, but that is not what is going on. Nearly 50,000 healthy animals are now being held captive in Bureau of Land Management holding facilities. Many suffer and die horrible deaths during the roundups, which are cruel and unnecessary.

Making matters worse, a five-year investigation released in July by the Wild Horse Freedom Federation accuses the bureau of deliberately trying to deceive American taxpayers and members of Congress about the costs and consequences of their actions.

The two most important things in the life of a wild equine are freedom and family. When they are rounded up, they lose both. They belong on the range. It is their home.

Which brings us to the current crisis — in which Congress is poised to take an already dire situation and make it exponentially worse.

In July, the House Appropriations Committee narrowly voted to adopt language, in the 2018 budget, known as the Stewart Amendment, allowing for the sale of wild horses and burros “without limitation,” which means slaughter.

The language of that measure simultaneously refers to horse slaughter as “humane euthanasia.” Nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing good about sending any equine to the slaughterhouse.

The winds are blowing still more stiffly against wild horses because there are more horse-slaughter proponents in positions of power in this administration than ever before, including two cabinet members — Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue.

No equine has been legally slaughtered in the United States since 2007. According to polls, most Americans are strongly opposed to horse slaughter.

But if lawmakers controlled by special interests have their way, those 50,000 captive wild horses and burros could meet that fate in Mexico, Canada or by returning horse slaughter to U.S. soil.

Allowing the destruction of these magnificent creatures would be to lose a part of America's soul. Let us all come together to urge Congress to restore their protections before it is too late.

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