Wild Horses: Endangered Animals or Menace?

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Description

There is a battle brewing over America's wild horses. Are they in need of protection, or a menace costing taxpayers millions of dollars every year? This story may be unsuitable for younger viewers.

Keywords


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Transcript

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MATT LAUER, anchor:
We’re back now at 7:40, with an NBC News exclusive, a battle over America’s wild horses. Now, depending who you believe, they are either seriously threatened or they are a menace that are costing taxpayers millions of dollars. NBC Senior Investigative Correspondent Lisa Myers has been looking at the crisis within the government’s Wild Horse Program. Lisa, good morning to you.

LISA MYERS, reporting:
Hey, Matt, good morning. First, we should warn everyone that this report contains a little bit of video of what’s happening to wild horses that is hard to watch. And no matter where you stand on the issue, you may find this fact alarming. There are now more wild horses held in captivity than living out in the wild. They are American icons, symbols of the boundless spirit of the Wild West, treasured by many who live near them, including singer/songwriter Carole King.

CAROLE KING (Wild Horse Preservation Advocate): Americans love freedom. These horses are the embodiment of freedom.

MYERS: These were the final moments of freedom recently for some wild horses in Utah. Helicopters drove 257 of them out of the Swasey Mountains, chased families for miles and finally captured them in a trap.

KING: I find that round-up so offensive because they’re so inhumane, so unnecessary, and so cruel.

MYERS: This scene of capture and panic witnessed many times by filmmaker Ginger Kathrens.

GINGER KATHRENS (The Cloud Foundation): I feel their fear. I know how much they love their families and their freedom. And in an instant, they lose both.

MYERS: After the roundup, males, females, and babies are split up, eventually sent to separate holding facilities. The Bureau of Land Management, BLM, charged with protecting wild horses and burrows reported no deaths or injuries at this round-up, though our cameras appear to show this foal trampled. Still at other roundups in 10 western states, horse advocates have documented brutality and death. A panic stallion nearly rips off his leg. Wild horses zapped with electric shocks.
WOMAN (Voiceover/American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign): They are using cattle prods on America’s wild horses.

MYERS: Horses severely weakened after running for miles. And wild burrows, too, chased and hit by a helicopter. We showed some of the activist footage to the head of the BLM program, Joan Guilfoyle. In your view, are those horses being treated humanely?

JOAN GUILFOYLE (BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program): There are some very heartbreaking pieces in there. Absolutely. So, no. I would say that the incidents that we see there are not the way we want animals to be handled.

MYERS: Guilfoyle says those incidents are isolated and that less than one percent of the horses die during round-ups. But critics complain many others die later of complications. What would happen if you just stopped all the round-ups?

GUILFOYLE: The population would continue to grow and grow and grow. And the range lands would continue to be overgrazed.

MYERS: BLM says there are too many wild horses and that it must manage the land for multiple uses including livestock, that pits the mustangs against powerful livestock interests who want cheap grazing on federal land. The cattle industry urges more aggressive use of birth control on the horses so there will be enough grazing and wild horse areas for ranchers like Fred Tolbert. If the roundup stopped, what would happen to your business?

FRED TOLBERT: I’d go broke. If my cows don’t calve, I don’t make any money.

BOB EDWARDS: The wild horses are not receiving a fair shake.

MYERS: Bob Edwards is a 30-year BLM veteran who managed wild horses and natural resources until he retired in 2005. BLM says there is simply not enough food on the range to sustain the wild horses.

EDWARDS: I don’t agree with that. There is enough. What really needs to be done is to reduce the livestock numbers.

MYERS: BLM acknowledges that in virtually every wild horse management area, livestock is allocated more forage than the horses. This is the BLM holding facility in Delta, Utah. Today, there are almost 50,000 wild horses in holding areas around the country, more than the roughly 32,000 left on the open range. Keeping more horses in captivity than in the wild cost taxpayers $78 million a year. And the government faces a crisis, what to do with 50,000 horses when only a tiny fraction gets adopted each year.

TOLBERT: Let them go to slaughter house. What value are they now?

MYERS: Inside BLM, there have been discussions in the past about slaughtering wild horses. Is BLM considering allowing horses to be sold for slaughter?

GUILFOYLE: Absolutely not. We never have and we never will.

MYERS: A lot of folks have said that instead of protecting the wild horses, that BLM is helping them disappear.

GUILFOYLE: That is absolutely not true. We care about them and we’re going to do our best to have them out there forever.

MYERS: Back in Utah, BLM says the roundups actually keep horses from starving to death in harsh conditions. So you’d rather have a wild horse starve to death and be free than live in captivity and live
KATHRENS: Now, you tell me what’s more humane or less humane, to let them die at an old age in their homes with their families or to terrorize them through these long drives with a helicopter, incarcerate them. If I were them, I’d vote to stay wild.

MYERS: Now, BLM recently established new expectations for its contractors to reduce abuses. But activists say the rules are weak. And we asked Joan Guilfoyle who again runs the Wild Horse Program, if she’d try to get more land or forage allocated to the horses. She said that’s not her job. Matt.

LAUER: All right, Lisa Myers in Washington. Lisa, thank you very much.