

# Utah State Professor testifies in Washington D.C. regarding wild horse and burro management

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On Tuesday, July 16th Utah State Associate Professor Eric Thacker testified at a hearing in Washington D.C. regarding wild horse and burro management. The hearing was called by the Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining to discuss the long-term options of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Wild Horse and Burro Program.

Thacker was called to testify along with four others regarding the BLM's current practices for wild horse and burro (WHB) management and to offer his opinion on a future proposal which would emphasize WHB contraception rather than the current practice

of gathering and removing herds, and eventually preparing them for reproduction.

Thacker described the dilemma, "Research has shown that wild horse populations are growing between 15 – 20% annually... there is a finite number of animals that can be supported on a landscape based upon forage, water, and space". The reality is that the majority of wild horses and burros are located in the west with half of all wild horse population residing in Utah and Nevada, as Senator Mike Lee attested in the hearing.



These animals are free-roaming and because of legislative mandates the BLM has limited management options. Wild horses and burros have no natural predators that

can effectively regulate their population. This has led to an increase in WHB numbers that was unforeseen when the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act (WFRHB) was passed in 1971. The act directed the BLM and the US Forest Service to manage wild horses in herd management areas that involved the minimum amount of management to achieve and maintain a "thriving natural ecological balance". This would ensure the protection of the WHB population, natural resources and rangelands, and other species dependent on those areas.

All five members of the proposal group as well as the entire Subcommittee agree that the implementation of the current WFRHB Act is unsustainable. The availability of forage in the west for the existing WHB population, wildlife and permitted livestock is limited. Further complicating the process, the supply of adoptable horses outpaces the demand for adoptable horses.

After each member of the panel gave their testimony the floor was opened for questions from the subcommittee members. Many members focused their questions on the capacity to regulate population growth of these animals. Methods of contraception and sterilization were examined. One option includes sterilization of the horses, however some members resisted this solution because of the lack of research on the after effects of the procedure. As for contraception there are a variety of products mentioned, some long term and some short. Long term would be more favorable as it would require less capture and release of the horses, which becomes more difficult as the frequency of captures increases.

Thacker's testimony in D.C. contributed to an overwhelming consensus that this issue requires immediate attention. There is no blanket solution to this issue, it will take a combination of concentrated efforts to improve the situation for the wild horses and burros as well as the rangelands. Whatever decision the Subcommittee comes to, it is clear that the current plan is not working.

**Access to the full hearing can be found [here](#)**