

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 11, 2022

The Honorable Secretary Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Chief Randy Moore
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Chief Moore:

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) management practices of wild horses at the Devil's Garden Plateau Wild Horse Territory in California's Modoc National Forest. We are particularly troubled by the agency's continued practice of removing horses from the Devil's Garden, failure to implement humane and effective fertility control vaccines, and the agency's adoption and sale practices.

In 2019, members of Congress sent a letter to the USFS expressing concern about the agency's plan to sell wild horses from Devil's Garden without restrictions on slaughter, which put these animals at significant risk of entering the slaughter pipeline. As noted in that letter, this represents a severe abdication of the government's responsibility to humanely manage these federally-protected horses.

Since that time, Congress has passed legislation prohibiting the USFS from destroying healthy wild horses and burros and selling these animals for slaughter for processing into commercial products. We understand that the sales and adoption contracts reflect that prohibition by including an agreement to not send the horses to slaughter. However, concerns remain about whether adequate steps are being taken to ensure the welfare of these wild horses and prevent them from entering the slaughter pipeline.

Our specific concerns include:

- The agency appears to lack a comprehensive and enforceable animal welfare program to guide the handling and care of animals during helicopter roundups, during transport, and in off-range holding facilities.
- The agency appears to lack adequate policies and procedures to screen potential adopters and purchasers to ensure the welfare and safety of the horses.
- The agency's "Guidance and Agreement for Maintenance and Care" was amended in 2020 to require compliance checks, but questions still exist about whether compliance checks are actually occurring and what methods are used.
- The agency's failure to freeze brand horses prevents visual identification of the horses if/when they are sold at auction.
- The agency's sale of horses for just \$25 puts horses at greater risk of slaughter at the hands of "kill buyers" looking to make a profit.

The slaughter process presents serious animal welfare concerns. Horses are typically transported long distances in crowded trailers without food, water, or rest. At the slaughterhouse, horses may endure repeated blows before loss of consciousness or death due to their unique physiology and strong fight-or-flight reflex. The U.S. Department of Agriculture documented appalling conditions and abuse in U.S. slaughterhouses before they ceased operations in 2007.

The intent of Congress is abundantly clear. Through annual Department of the Interior appropriations legislation, Congress has passed unambiguous language protecting wild horses from destruction for commercial purposes. Furthermore, legislation to permanently end horse slaughter has received significant support in Congress—217 Members of Congress from both parties have cosponsored H.R. 3355, the Save America's Forgotten Equines (SAFE) Act. Wild horses are beloved icons of our great country and the American people overwhelmingly oppose horse slaughter.

We would like to know what steps are being taken to prevent wild horses from entering the slaughter pipeline, including what procedures are implemented to vet buyers and what follow-up is conducted after a sale to verify that these horses are not being resold at slaughter auctions.

We encourage USFS to implement comprehensive animal welfare standards, thorough vetting of adopters and purchasers, compliance checks, a limit on the number of horses that can be adopted/purchased in one year, and freeze-branding to visually identify USFS wild horses. We urge the USFS to place an immediate moratorium on the capture, sale, adoption, and transportation of horses in the Modoc National Forest until an inquiry into the issues raised in this letter is completed.

We also encourage the USFS to manage Devil's Garden horses in a more humane, sustainable manner by implementing reversible immunocontraceptive fertility control vaccines, such as PZP. This vaccine is backed with nearly 40 years of scientific research, proving it is humane and effective. Experienced non-profit organizations are available and willing to assist the agency. The American Wild Horse Campaign offered to implement—and pay for—a program in this area in 2018 but the offer was rebuffed. The USFS removed over 2,400 Devil's Garden horses between 2018–2021. A vaccine program would reduce the expenditures and need for removal, resulting in a win-win for the welfare of the horses, taxpayers, and the agency.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

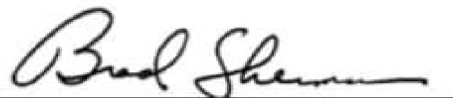
Sincerely,



Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress



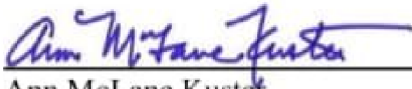
Brian Fitzpatrick
Member of Congress



Brad Sherman
Member of Congress



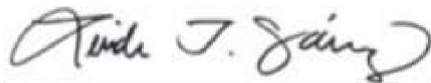
Steve Cohen
Member of Congress



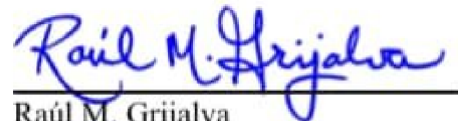
Ann McLane Kuster
Member of Congress



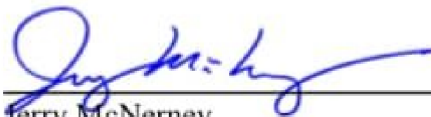
Dina Titus
Member of Congress



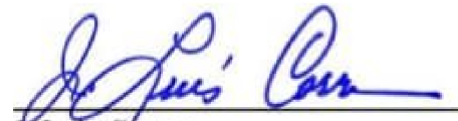
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Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



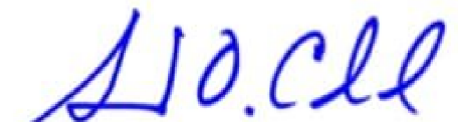
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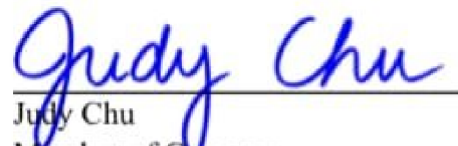
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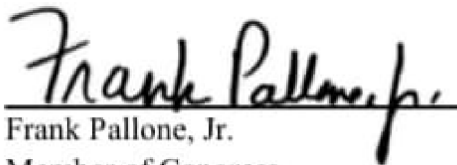
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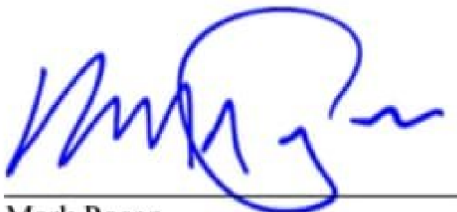
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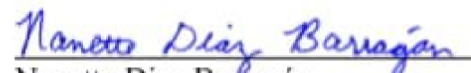
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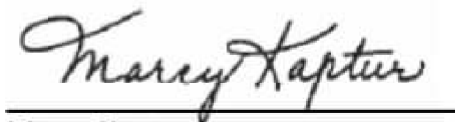
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Grace F. Napolitano
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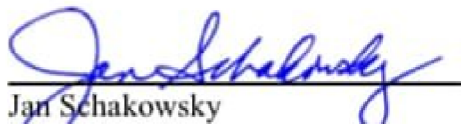
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