

Report: Livestock, not wild horses, have degraded public lands

By Nicolle Pollack / Casper Star-Tribune
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How much damage do wild horses inflict on Wyoming's public lands?

Not much, a conservation group's analysis of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) data found earlier this month — raising questions about the value of ongoing efforts to reduce the number of horses inhabiting federal lands used for livestock grazing, which has a significantly bigger impact on the health of Western ecosystems, according to the report.

"It's a super controversial program, and we were just curious to see what we would find," said Chandra Rosenthal, Rocky Mountain director at Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. "I hear a lot from BLM, people who are on the ground, that wild horses are a real problem. And so we wanted to see what was reflected in the data that they were recording."

Using data requested in increments from the BLM over the last 14 years, the Maryland-based nonprofit determined that just under half of the agency's assessed rangelands fail to meet its own health standards.

The BLM was unable to comment on the report by the Star-Tribune's press deadline.

"I think it's really important to have all of this data centralized," Rosenthal said. "The livestock allotments, what's going on with sage grouse, all of that stuff, it would be great to be able to go to a map BLM has and see exactly what's going on."

Once compiled, the assessments indicated that livestock were responsible for roughly 72% of that degradation, while a combination of livestock and wild horses caused about 13%. Less than 1% resulted from wild horses alone.

And in Wyoming, the report found, only 28,855 of the almost 14 million acres of rangeland assessed by the BLM — that assessed acreage accounts for 80% of the state's total — are failing due to horses, with or without livestock. But more than 6 million acres, many of which provide crucial habitat for the at-risk sage grouse, are failing because of livestock.

"The data is pretty clear and one-sided," said Chad Hanson, director of the Wyoming Mustang Institute. "It's livestock that do the lion's share of damage to public land. But the agency's choice, especially in the last two years, has been to remove wild horses from public land as a way to compensate for the damage done by livestock."

Under a deal with the Rock Springs Grazing Association made almost a decade ago, the BLM removed 3,540 wild horses, or two-thirds of the population, from five herd management areas in southwestern Wyoming in an effort to address some of the most degraded rangelands in the state.

The roundup, then the largest in BLM history, was praised by ranchers but incensed wild horse advocates. And the agency is working to authorize lowering those populations even further.

"I think, going forward, management practices have to change, and they have to be changed based on the available data," Hanson said. "If it's cattle that damage public property, then its cattle numbers that have to be reduced."

Article source: https://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/report-livestock-not-wild-horses-have-degraded-public-lands/article_7b4cd29c-679a-11ed-9d39-5be37c5b3ec4.html

<https://www.wyomustangs.org/people.html>

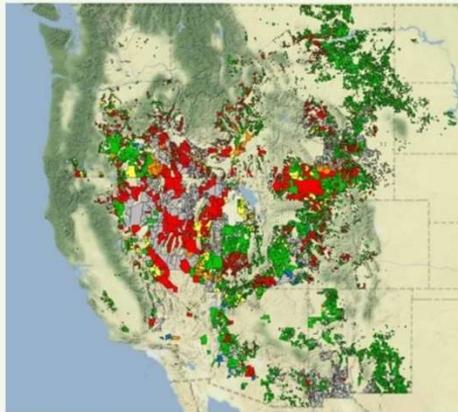
Rangeland health data: <https://mangomap.com/peer/maps/126421/blm-rangeland-health-status-2020-the-significance-of-livestock-grazing-on-public-lands#>

<https://peer.org/report-bureau-of-land-management-land-health-status-11-09-2022-pdf/>

Notable Findings in the Land Health Data

- Of the total acres assessed, BLM reports that 50% fail to meet Land Health Standards. This is a total of 54 million acres (approximately the area of Washington state).
- Of the lands that failed to meet LHS, BLM reported that in 72% of cases, “a significant cause” was livestock grazing. That is approximately 40 million acres that are failing due to overgrazing.
- BLM has assessed Land Health Standards for approximately 108 million acres of grazed public lands. The agency has yet to assess nearly 41 million acres.
- A portion of the assessed lands that are classified as “meeting” standards are actually only “making significant progress” toward meeting the standards, not actually meeting them.
- There are massive allotments that need agency attention. In Wyoming, for example, there is an allotment of over 950,000 public acres that is identified as failing Land Health Standards. BLM attributes “livestock grazing” as a significant cause. There is a 1.4-million-acre allotment in Nevada that has yet to be assessed.

Figure 1. Land Health of Total 151,000,000 BLM Managed Grazing Allotments



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Wild Horses and Burros

BLM Data Calls into Question Agency Policy Decisions on Wild Horses



BLM has a robust wild horse and burro control policy that is designed to maintain healthy lands. The agency regularly reduces the total number of horses on public lands to maintain the Appropriate Management Level (AML) in Herd Management Areas (HMA).

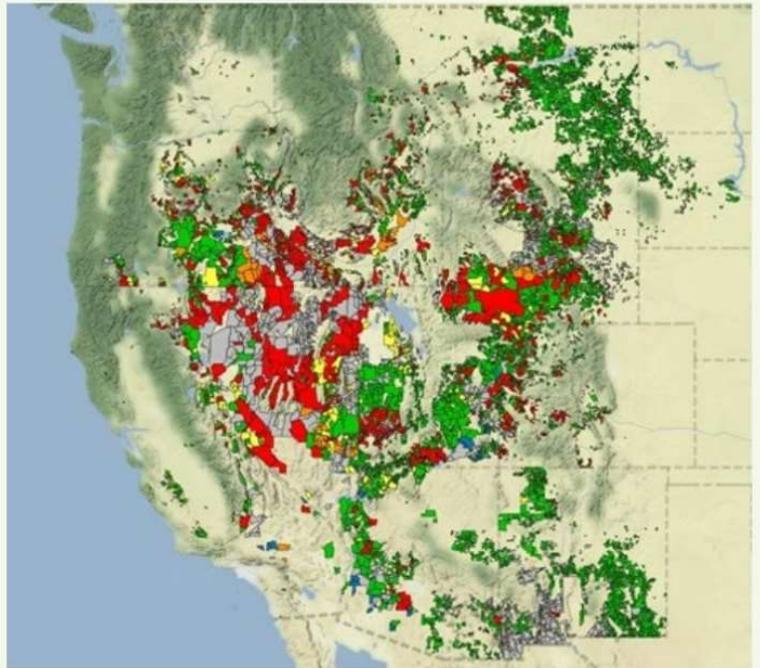
In early October 2022, BLM stated in a National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board meeting that it rounded up a total of 20,851 wild horses and burros and permanently removed 19,011 animals from federal rangelands in fiscal 2022. This record number exceeds by far the previous

record of 13,666 animals, which was set in 2021.

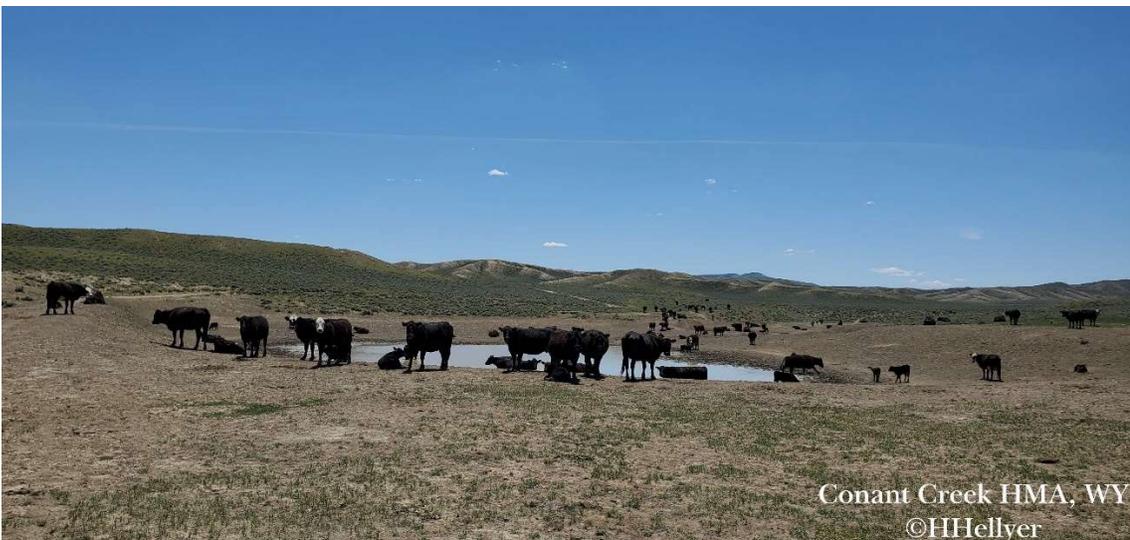
In contrast, BLM does not have a similar national strategy to analyze the impacts of the massive livestock grazing program even though its data indicates that livestock is a problem for land health. BLM data reveal that most of the allotments within HMAs that fail its standards for rangeland health – approximately 11.5 million acres of the 21.5 million acres of allotments within HMAs assessed by BLM to date – identify livestock as a significant cause of that failure. Overall, in allotments including those within HMAs, BLM cites livestock as the number one cause of allotments failing LHS, not horses.

Figure 1. Land Health of Total 151,000,000BLM Managed Grazing Allotments

- All Standards Met ■
- Not Met – Livestock ■
- Not Met – Cause Not Identified ■
- Not Met – Other ■
- Determination Not Complete ■
- Other ■



A calf pees into a water hole in the Conant Creek HMA, WY



Cattle surround a water hole in the Conant Creek HMA, WY