

EDITORIAL

Friends, indeed

The only way to keep wild horses from becoming an ecological disaster is to limit the number that roam free.

That means administering birth control and periodically rounding up some of them when the herd grows beyond what the land that they inhabit can sustain.

What becomes of them from there is a source of angst for everyone involved. Captured horses are available for adoption, but not enough find homes, leaving taxpayers on the hook for \$50 million a year in feed and care at holding facilities.

The Bureau of Land Management is caught in the middle of conflicting views on what to do about the proliferation of wild mustangs on the West's public lands.

Two years ago, the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Committee recommended the BLM "offer all suitable animals in long- and short-term holding deemed unadoptable for sale without limitation or humane euthanasia."

A predictable public outcry ensued. Wild horses and burros have been protected under federal law since 1971 as living symbols of the pioneer spirit. Destroying them seems anathema to the very policy that ensures their existence.

Fortunately, the band of wild horses that lives near the Grand Valley is so well managed that it doesn't produce an excess of unadoptable animals. That's largely due to the efforts of the local Friends of the Mustangs group that works with the BLM on behalf of the Little Book Cliffs herd.

Friends of the Mustang volunteers regularly administer contraceptives to mares in the band by injecting them using darts fired from an air rifle.

"We do a lot of things the BLM doesn't have the manpower and the money to do," Clifton resident Jerry Searcy, a former vice president of the group, told the Sentinel's Dennis Webb.

The group helps the BLM with range projects, such as maintaining watering holes, and provides tips to the public about training adopted horses.

Searcy has done things like taking his tractor out to blade Little Book Cliffs roads to help out the BLM, and letting the agency temporarily hold all the horses it rounds up in his corrals before they're shipped away to be readied for adoption.

Once the wild horses have been freeze-branded and vaccinated, Friends of the Mustangs do their level best to make sure horses taken off the Little Book Cliffs range get adopted.

A November auction successfully placed 27 horses that were gathered from the Little Book Cliffs herd last year. The remainder, 26 horses, along with a few horses from northwest Colorado's Piceance-East Douglas herd and two burros, will be available for adoption starting at 8 a.m., March 30, at Rimrock Adventures, 927 Colorado Highway 340, Fruita.

An associated mustang training demonstration and clinic day will be held March 29 at Rimrock Adventures, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Horses offered for adoption can be viewed all day March 29, and up until the silent bidding starts at 10 a.m. March 30.

More information may be found at the Friends of the Mustangs Facebook page and friendsofthemustangs.org or at <https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/adoption-and-sales>.

Anyone who loves the idea of these majestic animals roaming freely near De Beque — or has had the privilege of seeing them — can thank Friends of the Mustangs for helping them remain icons of the Western Slope.