

Rebekah Stetson for the record. Honorable Chairman Donate and members of the Natural Resources Committee, thank you for gifting me some of your valuable time and attention for my presentation this morning. I am an ecosystem health consultant by trade as well as the Chairwoman of the Coalition for Healthy Nevada Lands, Wildlife and Free Roaming Horses. I am here today to spread awareness in regards to the history of free roaming horses and burros and the debilitating impact they have on Nevada's Lands when not properly managed. This matter is really near and dear to my heart and my hope is that after this presentation, it is of greater importance to you also.

I grew up riding horses through the wild places of Northern Nevada and the relationship that I had with my horse, Lollipop, is still one of the most in depth and kindred friendships that I have ever had. Between the ages of twelve and seventeen, I was allowed to ride miles out of sight of civilization, gone all day, just my horse and me. It was these years of exploring that gave me a deep love for horses and that made me a life long lover and protector of the land, the water, and all its critters. In my early thirties I started to notice a lot more horses on the land and they didn't always look healthy. It was then that I started to get really curious as to what was going on and how I could help. Let's begin.

I think that we can all agree that we want to see healthy horses running free on our beautiful open ranges of Nevada. That symbol of freedom is under serious threat as evident in this first slide. This picture may come as a shock to some of you who are used to seeing fat and happy horses that live at the urban wild land interface, like the Virginia Range horses that are seen between Reno and Carson City. These horses, which are fed much and frequently by humans, are not representative of the horses across the state of Nevada. In the last twelve months, emergency gathers were carried out, in Nevada, in response to horses that were starving to death and dying of dehydration, a painful way to go. These animals are part of a huge web of life, which means, that more than just horses and burros are suffering. Our delicate ecosystems are diminishing quickly. Water, flora and wildlife are all being negatively impacted. Water sources, always minimal on our public lands, are being

decimated by a drying climate, wildfires and unchecked growth of horse and burro herds. BLM has been mandated to manage horses to AML or appropriate management level which is defined as what is necessary to preserve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance.

Before we really get into the thick of this complex issue, we would like to acknowledge that livestock grazing has measurable impacts on Nevada's land health. We have a full shed of tools for ways to accomplish successful livestock management to reduce negative impacts of domesticated livestock on the land. In contrast, free-roaming horses and burros remain on the range all 12 months of every year and there are only a couple of tools to mitigate their damage to the land.

We are responsible for free roaming horses and burros from their birth until their death. We are responsible for the destruction they may cause to water, riparian areas, loss of native grasses and other plants, and we are responsible to ensure that they are not starving or dying of thirst which is the case in parts of Nevada, making BLM emergency gathers a top priority over the last year.

We are responsible for the accident and injury that may come from these horses and burros being in the urban wild land interface. Their overpopulation impacts public health and safety in counties where these animals regularly wander onto roadways and other public right of ways. Through my twenties and into my early thirties I lived in Lyon County, very close to Hwy 50. Almost monthly there was a vehicle horse accident close to my home, almost always being fatal to the horse and frequently causing the loss of one of my community members. According to the Nevada Department of Transportation, in 2017 through 2019, there were 240 horse related vehicle accidents in Nevada.

Now, let's get into the history. It should be noted at the outset, that wild horses are not native to North America. The last true *wild* horses went extinct after the Pleistocene epoch at least 7,500 years ago. The horses of today were brought to America by Europeans.

Velma Johnson known as Wild Horse Annie, and Dawn Lappin, were the strong women who effectively saved free roaming/ wild horses from the demise of their time. Their main objective was to get free roaming/wild horses recognized as an element of the Western Public Lands and to ensure their humane treatment. Prior to the passage of The Wild and Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act, wild horses had no standing and were unprotected just like coyotes and jackrabbits are today. They could be captured by any means. They could be shot, and they could be sold for unrestricted private use. Mustangers would sometimes use inhumane methods of capture including chasing with ground vehicles, airplanes, and running horses almost to death. So, Wild Horse Annie particularly wanted to stop such activity and to give horses humane protection. In the late 60's and 70's there were not many wild horses in Nevada. I don't believe that Annie ever envisioned the extreme number of horses that occupy Nevada rangelands today. What she wanted was humane treatment that would lead to healthy horses on the land. That is not what we have today.

Public Law 92-195 titled THE WILD FREE ROAMING HORSES AND BURROS ACT OF 1971 (WH&B) was enacted by Congress in 1971, largely due to the dedicated efforts of Wild Horse Annie. The Coalition for Healthy Nevada Lands considers the Act to be well crafted with carefully considered provisions to ensure success and to preclude the very situation that we are confronted with today: Horse numbers significantly exceeding the carrying capacity of Nevada rangelands.

There are some key provisions of the act that I would like to speak to:

1. Policy of Congress that wild free roaming horses and burros shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment or death, and they are to be considered in the areas where presently found (1971) as an integral part of the natural system of the public lands.
2. The Act applies to public lands managed by the BLM and USFS.

3. The secretaries of Interior and Agriculture must manage WH&B in a manner to preserve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationship on public lands.

4. When the Secretary determines that it is necessary to remove excess animals, that person shall do so immediately to maintain the appropriate management level (AML).

5. All management activities shall be carried out in consultation with the state wildlife agency to protect the natural ecological balance of all wildlife species, particularly endangered wildlife.

The WH&B Act was the result of years of collaborative work by many people who desired a sustainable program to be successful over time with necessary management funding, management tools, and direction to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance. It passed the US Senate 98-0. While the program was initially successful, it unraveled over time as management became entangled in politics, lawsuits and a long lull while new humane tools were discovered and vetted. During this lull in management, exponential growth of the wild horse and burro population spiraled out of control. This alarming situation motivated [The Path Forward](#) and other coalitions seeking a solution to prevent potentially dire consequences to horses and to their habitats. That has helped motivate Congress and the BLM's [Report to Congress: An Analysis of Achieving a Sustainable Wild Horse and Burro Program](#). This report seeks a solution that works across interests. We are thankful for this report and know that more needs to be done faster.

Expeditious action, backed by enough funding from congress, must be taken now to ensure the future welfare of Nevada's wildlife, lands and free roaming horses and burros. In closing, I ask for each one of you to support SJR3 and in doing so, advocate for a multi-faceted and expedient approach to managing these beautiful creatures. Thank you for your time and attention. I would love to hear any comments you may have and answer any questions.