

SWANSON TEXT FOR NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE -

Still on slide 3 (the Act)

Thank you Chairman Donate and the Natural Resources Committee for enabling us to have this important discussion today in support of SJR3. For the record, I am Dr. Sherman Swanson, UNR Emeritus Professor of Rangeland and Riparian Ecology and Management and a member of the Coalition for Healthy Nevada Lands Wildlife and Wild Horses.

As we transition from history into the current situation that provided the basis and need for the resolution, I will speak from a perspective that I developed as the Range and later the Riparian Extension Specialist for the University of Nevada over a 36 year career. Before my career the Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act had been augmented by the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act and the Public Rangelands Improvement Act which provided additional tools for gathering wild horses, which is essential for management, and adopting out the excess horses. The standards for humane treatment had been well established.

Throughout my career there have been many issues to discuss and many discussions about wild horse and rangeland management on public lands. The subject was important enough in 1990 that we devoted the entire program to wild horse management of our Nevada Section meeting of the Society for Range Management. Free-roaming horse management was also often an issue ten years later when I served as the academic representative to the BLM Resource Advisory Committee. I remember all three RACs agreeing that the standards for rangeland health should apply to horses and burros as well as other grazing management. Throughout my career, the subject of rangeland monitoring has been a recurring theme with three editions of the Nevada Rangeland Monitoring Handbook. I am proud to say that all three were discussed thoroughly to achieve consensus by all key state and federal agencies and interests. Agreement was important to us even as we learned to focus on sustaining the scarce and critically important creeks, springs, and other riparian areas that most wildlife need and that most land users cherish.

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By 2007 rangeland managers had learned to use monitoring as the basis for appropriate management Level (AML) with a high and a low level. This enables gathers to occur just often enough to keep horses from impairing habitats and ecosystems while maintaining sufficient numbers to sustain herds. Nationally, and almost in Nevada, we had finally gotten to the high end of AML. We adopted out over 7000 horses that year. Then came the Great Recession. With economic challenges, too few could afford the extra burden of adoption for private horse care. That has shown us what happens when we take our eyes off the ball, horses multiply. We have long talked of exponential growth with consistent doublings of horse numbers in the near absence of effective predation, and now we can see where it leads. The take-home lesson is that populations need management. Without consistent and effective management, populations get to four times AML with only two doublings. The next doubling would be truly ominous. Fortunately we have also learned in recent years that nonreproducing herds can be maintained very humanely in private off-range pastures. Their numbers slowly decline as horses live out their lives.

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But now we have too many horses in the wrong places. When too many horses graze and trample throughout the year or throughout the growing season, plants die and water drains away as if in a pipe. As water drains away, the green zones shrink. Our Nevada Habitats, especially those riparian green zones critical to wildlife, horses and all of us, can lose their ability to grow the plants that maintain the sponge holding water from infrequent precipitation. Riparian areas are resilient until they lose their ability to hold water. Most rangeland plant communities are resilient until they lose their soil or lose the perennial plants that hold soil in place and that grow back to life in spring. None of us want the downward spiral of diminishing habitats. All of us want a thriving natural ecological balance and multiple use relationships.

Thank you for your time. For additional focus on wildlife and the resolution, Dr. Jim Seding is a colleague from UNR with deep knowledge of wildlife ecology.