



# Bleats and Blats

Official Newsletter of the  
Desert Bighorn Council  
July 2015



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*Hello DBC members and friends,*

*Seems like I start every newsletter the same way and that is with an apology for the delay in getting the newsletter out.*

*Each newsletter I have to dig and scrape for content. I need your help. What's going on with desert bighorn sheep in your jurisdiction that folks would be interested in knowing a little bit more about? Research updates, changes in management, disease concerns... please take a moment write me an update.*

*Outside of work, club softball with my 2 daughters is consuming my life – different teams, different directions, lot of miles on the car. It is fun to watch my girls play and improve but it leaves me no time for diving. I need to splash (that is the term for stepping in the water to start your dive) so my mind and body get recharged. California kelp fields, here I come – hopefully soon.*

*For more information about the Desert Bighorn Council or to download a membership form, please visit our website at [www.desertbighornCouncil.com](http://www.desertbighornCouncil.com).*

*All the best to you,  
Amber Munig (DBC Secretary)*

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## **Desert Bighorn Council Meeting – Borrego Springs, CA**

The 53<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Desert Bighorn Council on April 14-17, 2015, was attended by 104 desert bighorn sheep biologists and aficionados from the United States and Mexico. Ben Gonzales (California Fish and Wildlife) chaired the meeting. The key focus of the meeting was respiratory disease in desert bighorn sheep. Registered meeting participants represented a wide variety of agencies and organizations, including State wildlife agencies and Mexico (51%), universities (14%), Federal and other state agencies (13%), and non-governmental organizations (11%), with the remainder representing Native American tribes, commercial businesses, and non-affiliated attendees.

Other than the excellent presentations, there are two important items of note from the meeting.

- 1) Changes to the bylaws were approved; the approved bylaws can be accessed on the Council website under the About Us heading.
- 2) The Council will stop printing the DBC Transactions and only provide a downloadable electronic version on the website. A “Print-on-Demand” option through an independent company will be provided for those who wish a bound copy.

The next Council meeting will be held in 2017 and will be hosted by the Utah Division of Wildlife resources; the location and dates for the meeting are still to be determined. The 2017 meeting Chairman will be Dustin Shaible with Justin Shannon as vice-chair.

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### **2015 DBC Transactions**

We invite and encourage you to publish your work in the DBC Transactions. Submissions for the 2013 Transactions will be accepted through August 15, 2015. If you would like to submit a paper or if you are working on a 2015 state report, this is the time to get materials prepared and sent to Jimmy Cain, DBC Transactions Editor. So far, Jimmy has only received a couple of state reports so we hope the rest of the states complete their reports soon! The 2015 DBC Transactions will be provided as a downloadable electronic version on the website with a “Print on Demand” purchase option.

Please remember that any manuscript addressing the ecology, biology, management, and conservation of desert bighorn sheep, even if not presented at a Desert Bighorn Council meeting, may be submitted for publication in the Transactions. For more information, please email Jimmy Cain at [jwcain@nmsu.edu](mailto:jwcain@nmsu.edu).

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### **Hansen - Welles Scholarship**

One Hansen-Welles Scholarship was awarded to:

- Mr. Carlos Gonzalez-Gonzalez in the amount of \$8,500 for his proposal, “Spatial, Temporal, and Demographic Characteristics of Desert Bighorn Sheep in West Texas”

## **Desert Bighorn Council Awards**

**Submitted by Vern Bleich, Awards Committee Chair**

Recipients of the Ram Award were:

- Don Armentrout (BLM Retired) for decades of service to the conservation and management of desert bighorn sheep and, especially, for efforts to protect and enhance habitat for desert bighorn sheep inhabiting the Peninsular Ranges of southern California, and for many years of service to the Council.

Recipients of the Honor Plaque were:

- Brian Wakeling (NDOW) in appreciation of his role as Editor-in-Chief of The Desert Bighorn Council Transactions Volumes 47 – 52 and his support of scientific inquiry and its relevance to the conservation of and management of Desert Bighorn Sheep.
- Leon and LaVelle Lesicka (Desert Wildlife Unlimited) for leading Desert Wildlife Unlimited in a decades-long effort to enhance habitat for Desert Bighorn Sheep and Desert Mule Deer, designing and installing a new generation of wildlife water developments, advocating for sensible management of the public's land and wildlife, and unflagging support of graduate students working in the Sonoran desert of southeastern California.
- Steve de Jesus (Landells Aviation, retired helicopter pilot) for his skill as a helicopter pilot and wildlife capture specialist, the application of those skills to the restoration and management of Bighorn Sheep throughout California, and his preeminence as a search and rescue pilot.

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## **Arizona – Status of Tonto National Forest Wilderness Bighorn Sheep Capture Environmental Assessment**

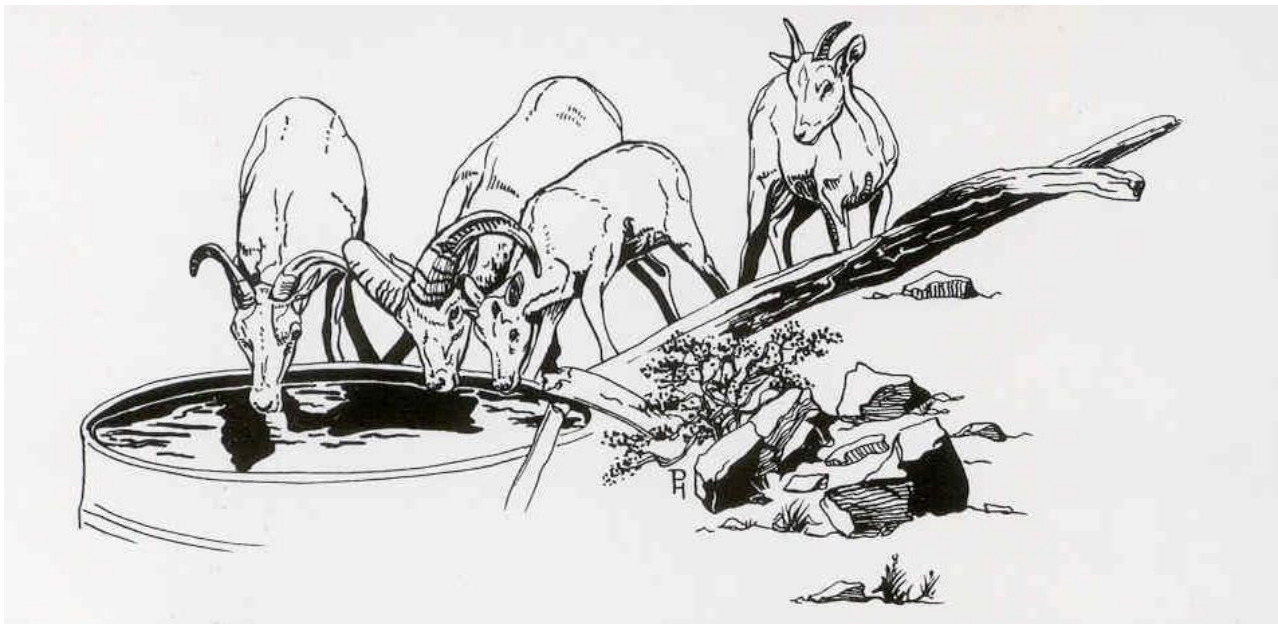
In 2010 and 2012, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department) sought authorization to land helicopters in the Four Peaks and Superstition wilderness areas to capture bighorn sheep and the Forest granted such authorization through application of the Minimum Requirements Decision Guide (MRDG) process. After authorization in 2012, the Forest indicated the need to complete an environmental assessment should additional helicopter landings in wilderness be necessary for bighorn sheep management. This direction came from the USFS Regional Office.

In February 2014, the Department started coordination with the Forest to develop an environmental assessment for those portions of the capture operations that lie within wilderness areas. Cooperating agency status for this project was granted to the Department by the Forest in April 2014. The Final Environmental Assessment (EA) for Authorization of Helicopter Landings in Wilderness on the Forest, Draft Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact, and associated documentation (Biological Assessment and Fish and Wildlife Service Concurrence, MRDG) was published on October 3, 2014. Proposed capture dates were November 19-23, 2014, but during the 45 day legal notice of objection, the Forest received two substantive objections from which the Forest had 45 days

to respond. Due to these National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process timelines, the Department was not able to capture within the proposed wilderness areas and the Department subsequently modified the capture areas to those outside of wilderness only. The Department captured 14 bighorn sheep out of the original 30 planned for removal from the Forest due to lack of authorization to land helicopters within the proposed wilderness areas.

The Draft Decision Notice/Finding of No Significant Impact and the MRDG were not signed; subsequently no record of decision was made due to the substantive objections the Forest received. The USFS Regional Office issued an objective response letter on January 19, 2015 indicating "...that the analysis presented in the EA and supporting documentation does not adequately address Forest Service responsibilities under the Wilderness Act and other guidance that requires coordination with States related to wildlife and fish management in wilderness." The USFS Regional Office asked the Forest to reevaluate the EA and MRDG given the substantive points raised in the objections.

The Department and the Forest began revising the EA and MRDG with the expectation that a capture may occur in November 2015 subsequent to the NEPA process. During the evaluation of the project as it relates to the Wilderness Act of 1964, the USFS Regional Office and the Department continue to evaluate and work through the NEPA process to maintain the integrity of the initial documents outlining the three parts requiring helicopter landing in wilderness: (1) response to bighorn sheep zoonotic disease, (2) bighorn sheep research and monitoring, and (3) bighorn sheep translocation. Discussions and revisions of the NEPA compliance documents remain a priority for both agencies to collaboratively work towards a mutual and beneficial solution to allow the State to maintain its mandated authority to manage wildlife within the Tonto National Forest while observing that the Forest is mandated to make decisions based on preserving/promoting wilderness character, which may not align with optimal and traditional strategies for wildlife management.



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## **Bighorn Respiratory Disease Train-the-Trainer Workshop Standardizing Approaches for Bighorn Respiratory Disease Investigations**

This training was the product of recommendations brought forth during the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and Wild Sheep Foundation sponsored 2014 Bighorn Respiratory Disease Workshop. The training was geared toward implementing relatively standard approaches for investigations of bighorn respiratory disease problems west-wide; it was designed to provide representatives from participating states and provinces with first-hand experience in field and laboratory techniques. The overarching goal is to provide more consistent and comparable data on regional bighorn respiratory disease investigations as a foundation for developing adaptive management approaches to minimize or mitigate impacts on herd health and performance.

Wildlife veterinarians, disease specialists, and wild sheep managers gathered in Fort Collins, at this training held at Colorado Parks and Wildlife's Foothills Wildlife Research Center and sponsored by the Wild Sheep Foundation. Eighteen states, provinces, and territories were represented during this 2.5-day training session.

Combining expertise from the WAFWA Wildlife Health Committee and Wild Sheep Working Group, 35 professionals conducted and shared the newest diagnostic techniques and sampling protocols for investigating and monitoring wild sheep disease issues, including cutting-edge respiratory pneumonia and sinus tumor research.

This training was designed to enable the wildlife veterinarians and managers to enhance their skills, and then train colleagues in their respective jurisdictions.

Here is a brief glance at the agenda from the July 7-9, 2015 training:

Day 1

- Review of revised (2015) bighorn sheep sampling protocols
- Instruction in animal handling, bleeding, equipment
- Live animal sampling instruction demonstrations
- Under the microscope

Day 2

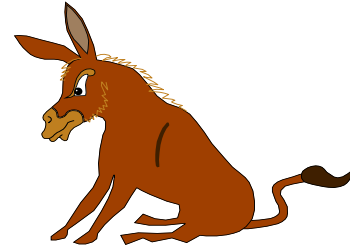
- Clinical herd health assessment
- Necropsy & sampling instruction demonstrations
- Sample handling & processing instruction
- Kodak moments: Photography tips & instruction

Day 3

- Jurisdiction-specific herd health assessment data reviews
- Planning and adapting for the future

Key reference materials used: *Wild Sheep Herd Health Monitoring Recommendations* and a *Necropsy Field Manual* provided by Western Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies, Wildlife Health Committee

**2015 Burro Management Report**  
**Desert Bighorn Council**  
**Borrego Springs, CA**  
**By Ross Haley**



This report is traditionally given in the business meeting as the Burro Committee Report, but was unintentionally skipped. I developed this presentation for the general session to inform a broader audience.



Probably everyone here knows why burros are a big issue, but many don't deal with their impacts directly. However, for states where they occur and where burros are protected under the Wild Horse and Burro Act of 1971, they can be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, problem to deal with when managing for healthy bighorn populations and healthy rangelands. Burros are not native to the U.S., they are fiercely competitive, and they can be extremely destructive. Populations often grow at a rate of approximately 25% per year.

**2010 Burro Population Estimates**

	Population Estimate	Appropriate Management Level (AML)	Difference
Arizona	2248	1436	812
California	1069	453	616
Nevada	1177	808	369
Utah	164	170	-6
Totals	4658	2867	1791

I was unable to attend the last meeting in Las Cruces in 2013 but in 2011, these were the basic data collected by the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program. After years of progress toward achieving Appropriate Management Level (AML), numbers were again growing, with an estimated 4,658 burros in four states exceeding the AML by 1,791 animals. This raised concerns.

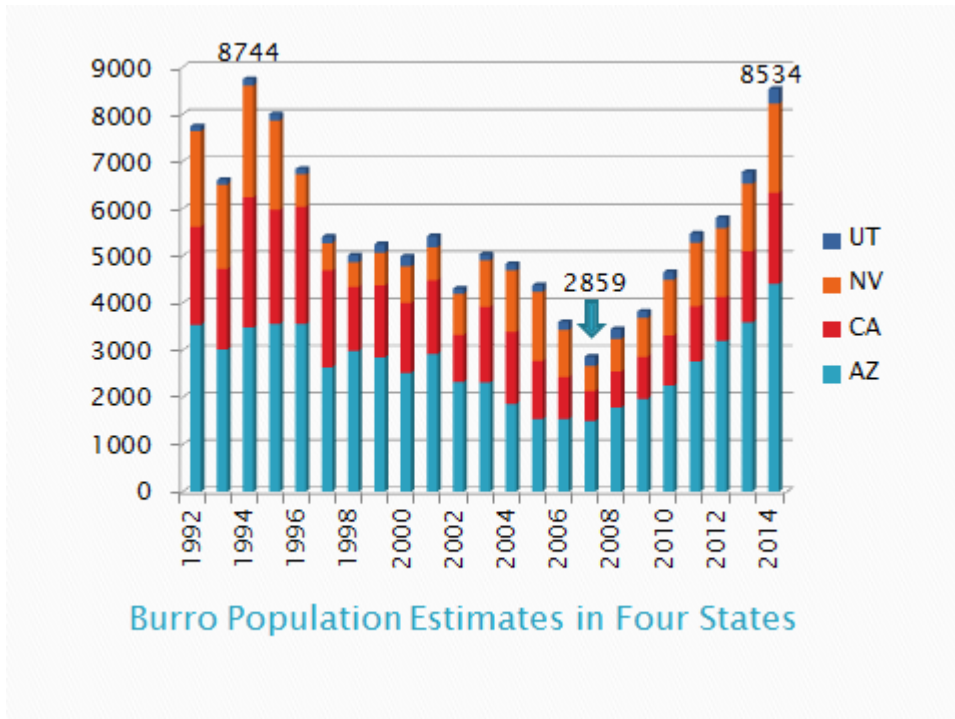
# 2014 Burro Population Estimates

	Population Estimate	Appropriate Management Level (AML)	Difference
Arizona	4411	1436	2975
California	1922	465	1457
Nevada	1888	824	1064
Utah	313	170	143
Totals	8534	2895	5639*

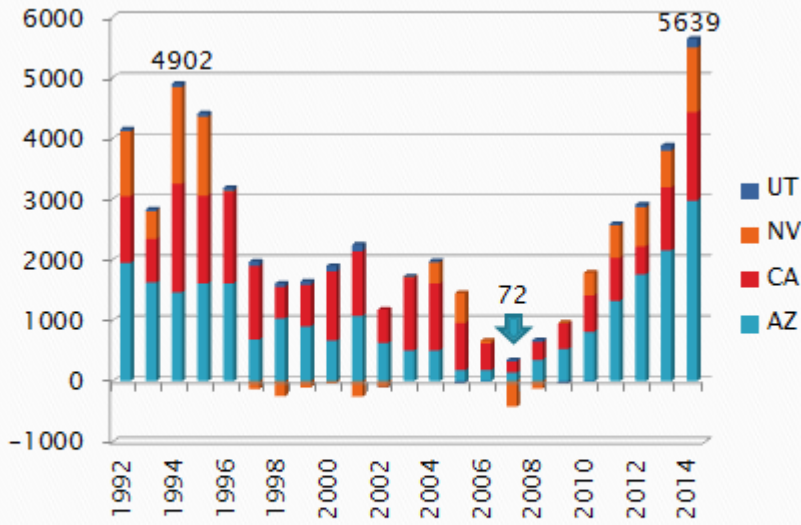
Unfortunately, that trend has continued, and there are now an estimated 8,534 burros which is 5,639 over AML. This is an increase of approximately 215% in the number over AML from 2010.



\*Approximately a 215% increase over AML from 2010

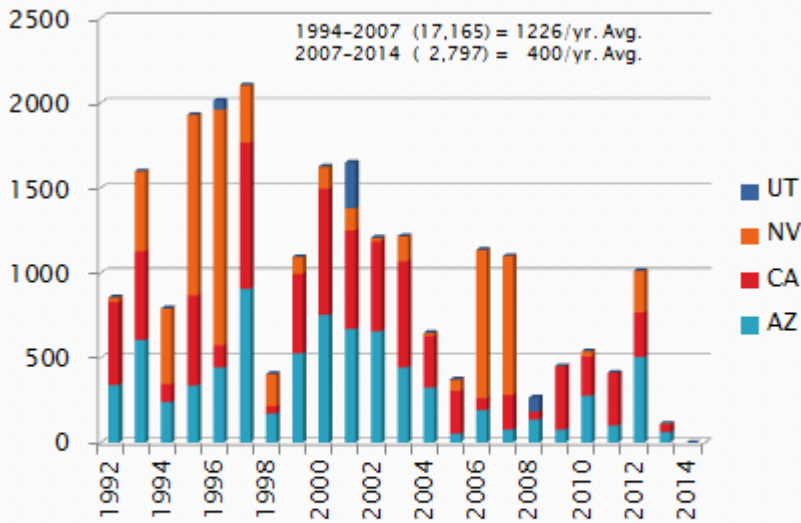


The trend can be seen graphically in this slide. After about 15 years of a relatively steady population decline, the trend started to reverse. Increases in numbers over the past 7 years have resulted in numbers as high as they've been in at least the past 20 years.



Burros Exceeding AML in Four States

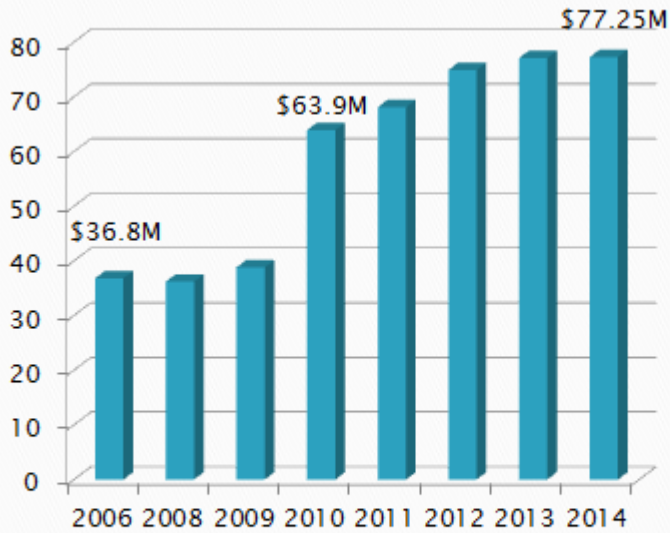
If you look at the trend in relation to the actual management goal of achieving the AML, you can see that according to BLM statistics the AML was actually achieved in 2007. However, over the next seven years, the number in excess of AML goals skyrocketed.



Burro Removals in Four States

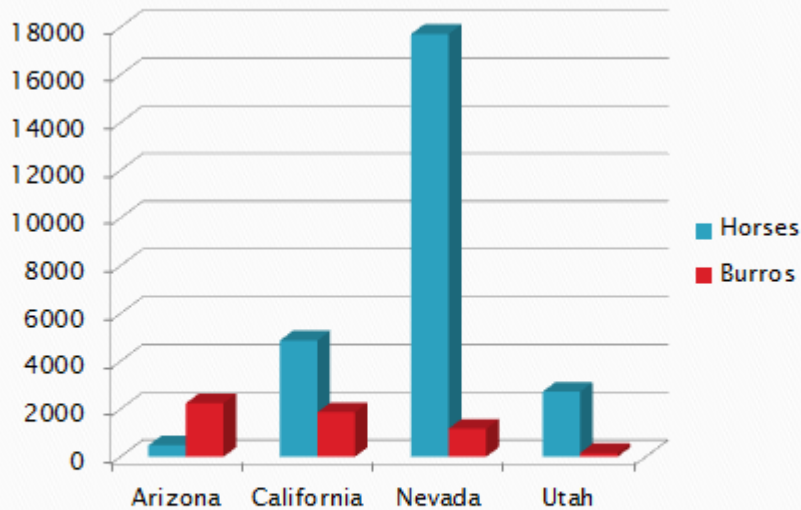
Logically, it would seem that if your goal is to control population increase through captures, that the number of captures should increase as numbers increase, but it's pretty clear from this graph that that has not been happening. There is no clear correlation between the number of burros on the range, or the number in excess of AML, and the number of animals captured each year. In fact, it seems that the most significant driver of captures in the past 25 years or so has been the National Park Service. The dramatic increase in Nevada captures during 1995-1996 resulted from the finalization and initial implementation of the Lake Mead Burro Management Plan and EIS. Similarly, the increase in captures in California beginning in 1999 coincides with the creation of the Mojave National Preserve and the expansion of Death Valley National Park.





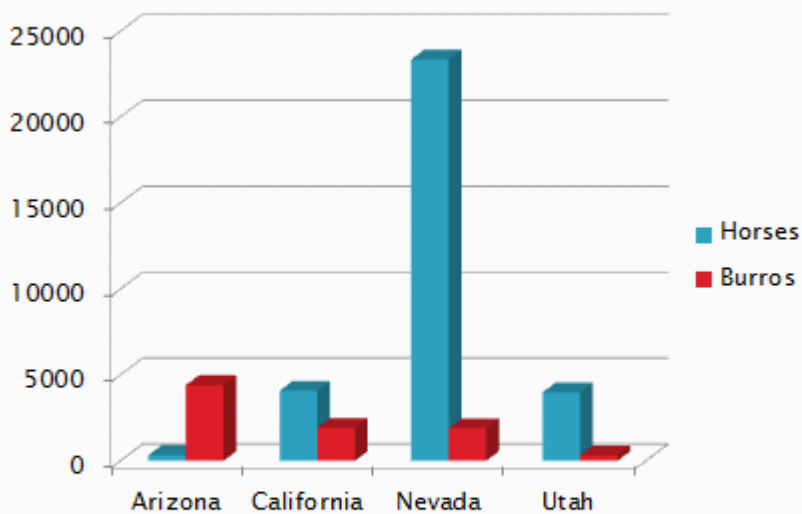
Horse and Burro Budget Trend

One might also surmise that the number of captures might be driven by budget concerns since the BLM must use appropriated funds to implement the Wild Horse and Burro Act. One certainly might guess this is part of the problem given recent budget issues with the BLM, the Department of the Interior, and federal government in general. However, an examination of recent budgets for the Wild Horse and Burro Program show that they have been increasing at a generous rate, from \$36.8 million in 2006 to over \$77 million in 2014 (about a 110% increase) in 8 years.



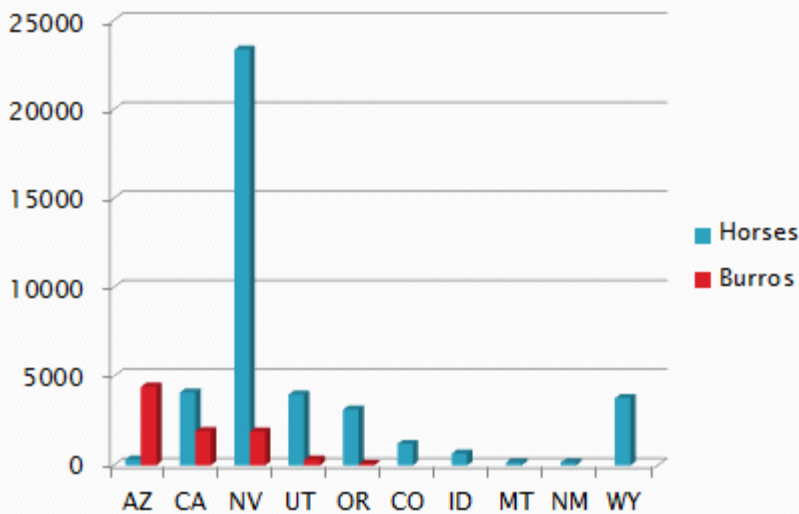
2010 Horse and Burro Estimates

As you may recall, in 2010, I pointed out that possibly the biggest barrier to managing burro populations close to the AML is the number of horses that BLM must also manage. I used this graphic to show the relative magnitudes of the problems associated with the management of horses vs. those of burros.



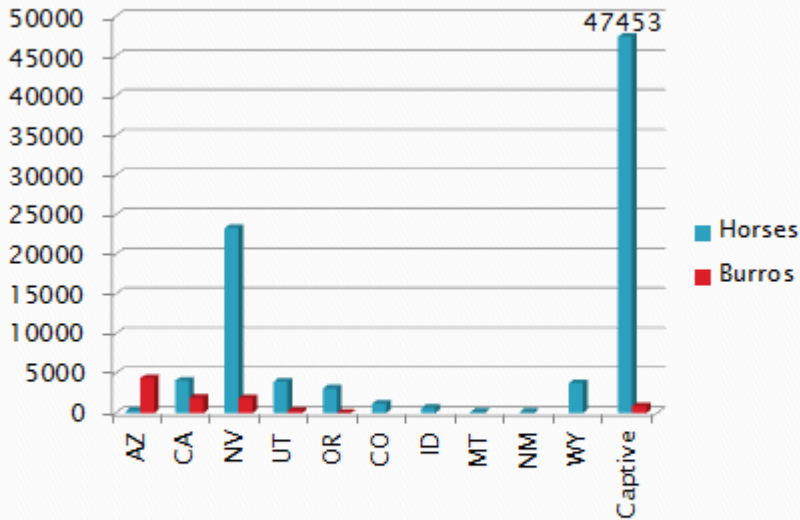
2014 Horse and Burro Estimates

Today that graph looks pretty similar, although the magnitude of the problem has grown even more. (The Y axis here needed to be extended from 18,000 to 25,000).



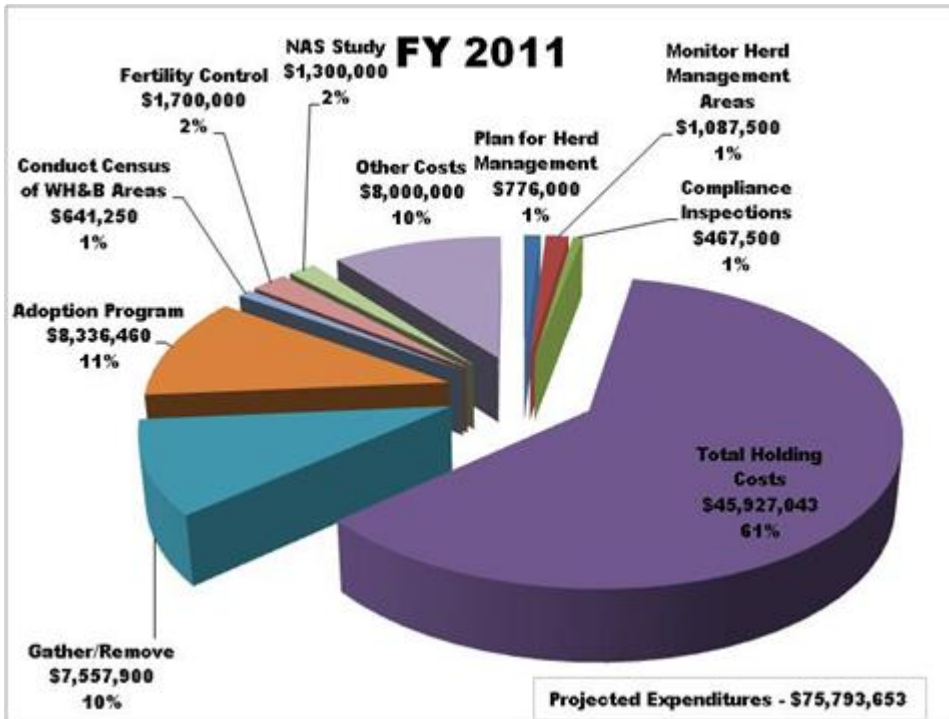
2014 Horse and Burro Estimates

But even that is not the whole picture because wild horses are found in 10 states and burros only occur in 5 (I generally only report on 4 states here because Oregon only has about 60 burros and they don't compete with Desert Bighorn in that state). But this still isn't the whole picture, the situation is even worse than this...



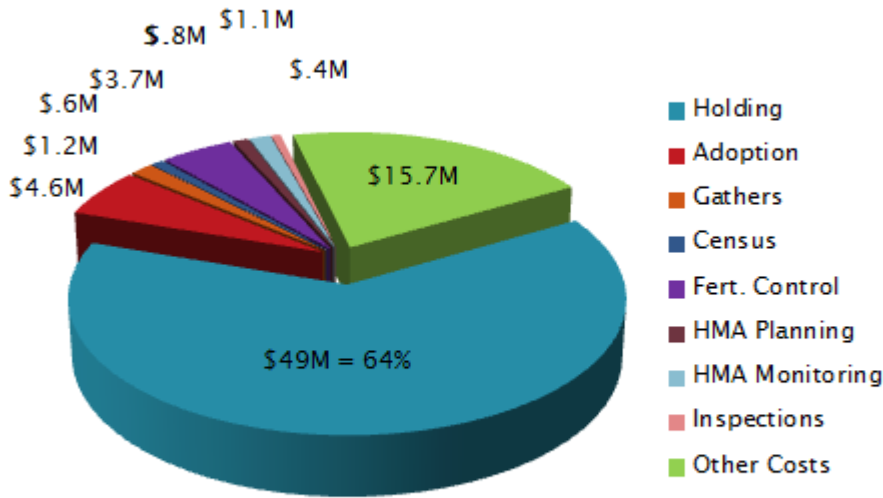
2014 Horse and Burro Estimates

This is the situation that BLM managers are attempting to deal with. Imagine that you were to wake up tomorrow morning and find yourself in charge of the BLM's Wild Horse and Burro program. What would it take to convince you that the small red columns on this graph were a crisis you needed to address? Keep in mind also, that horses are about twice as large as burros so they cost more to capture, transport, and feed. I considered taking this slide progression a step further and showing relative biomass, but I think you get the picture. The horse problem simply dwarfs the burro problem to such an extent that a logical argument can't be developed to make burro management a high priority at the present time. Each of these animals represent a liability as each one in captivity must be fed and cared for, and most of the ones in the wild can, and will, reproduce. Consequently, they and their offspring will require a future investment to capture, transport, treat, and feed. Both species live a long time, with life expectancies exceeding 20 years (particularly when taken into captivity) so these numbers simply will not decrease without aggressive actions being taken.



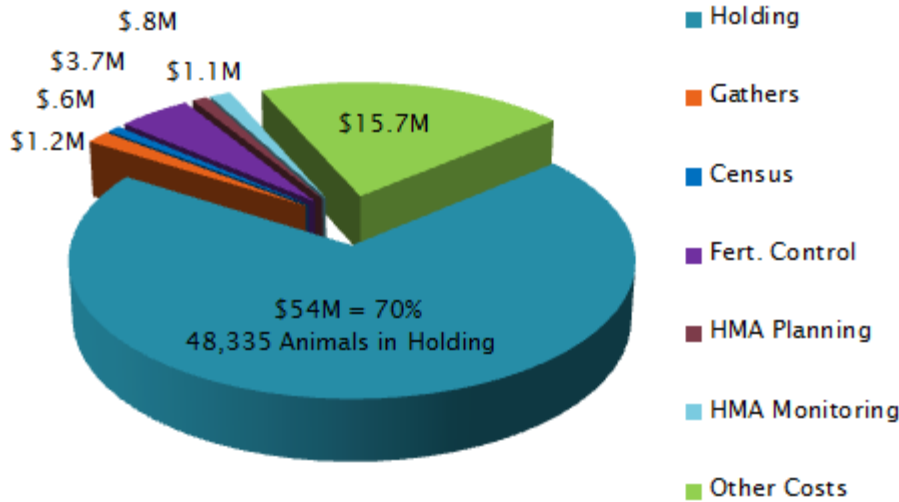
In 2010, I presented this graphic representation of the projected Wild Horse and Burro Program budget for 2011. At roughly \$75 million this represented another 17% increase or roughly 107% over two years. Although the budget is broken down into more categories than captive care and management, an examination of these various categories revealed that despite this large budget increase, the program was still expending a larger and larger percentage of the budget on care of captured animals. I showed two more slides in 2011 where I demonstrated that if you lumped the various categories in this slide into two categories, captive care and management, anywhere from 72 to 83% of the budget was being used for two categories.

**2014 Program Costs (\$77.25M)**



This year, I was unable to find any published figures on where the money was being spent, and although I called and e-mailed the Wild Horse and Burro Program requesting an updated information, they didn't provide it. This is the best I could do from what I know with some speculation. The chief of the Wild Horse and Burro Program provided the figure that 64% of the \$75.25 million budget is projected to go for "captive care". The \$4.6 million for the Adoption Program and the \$1.2 million for gathers are published numbers, and it has also been published that funding for fertility control has been increased by \$2million so I added that much to the 2011 total. Other categories I held constant at the 2011 budget, but this resulted in a large increase in the "Other" category (from \$8 million to \$15.7 million).

**2014 Program Costs (\$77.25M)**



If you consider that the adoption program costs are part of captive care, and the facility inspections also fall into that category, you can see that at a minimum 70% of the budget is going to captive care. If you add the "other" category to this figure, the amount being spent on captive care may be approaching 90% of the budget. Since there are now 48,335 animals in holding today vs. about 45,000 in 2011, it seems highly unlikely that the situation has gotten any better despite the almost \$2 million budget increase since that time (remember that the budget for fertility control alone, has gone up by \$2 million).

## Since Passage of the Act (1971)

- ▶ Over 210,000 horses removed
- ▶ 42 year Average = 5092/yr
- ▶ Over 36,000 burros removed
- ▶ 42 year average = 669/yr.

## Conclusions

- BLM estimate of 8534 burros is 5639 above AML
- This represents a 215% increase in the number over AML since 2010
- Despite substantial increases in funding the average number of captures/year has declined
- The situation is not likely to get better due to demands on the program from wild horses and captive “wild horses”

\*Data are from BLM, population estimates are conservative

Since passage of The Wild Horse and Burro Act, a lot of money has been spent, and the BLM has done a tremendous amount of work removing over 210,000 horses and 36,000 burros, but it hasn't been nearly enough to stop the population growth of either horses or burros, nor has it been successful at stopping the habitat degradation that is being caused by these exotic herbivores on our western rangelands.

These are some simple conclusions, but I should point out that although it may sound like it, I mean no disrespect to my friends and colleagues that work for BLM, nor do I hate horses and burros; these are simply the facts, and if anything, I have painted a slightly rosier situation than really exists. For example, I have used published BLM population numbers and AMLs without questioning the appropriateness of the published “appropriate management levels” (AMLs), nor have I questioned the accuracy of the population estimates, which have been shown time and again to seriously underestimate actual numbers when rigorous studies are done. I believe, BLM is doing a better job on this, but the estimates still must be considered to be very conservative. Still, public opinion is stacked against anyone who wishes to address this problem. Forty states have no wild horse and burros covered under the act, so even if everyone in the 10 states that do was in favor of change, they would still be outnumbered, and it's clear that even in the 10 western states, the majority of people believe the BLM should be less aggressive, not more, in managing the horse and burro problem. A clear majority, or perhaps a supermajority, of the comments on the internet favor being more humane to wild horses and burros, and managing for more of them, not less. The BLM has been dealt a rotten hand. They have been asked to implement a law which defies the laws of nature, and that simply won't work. I dislike giving a talk with no recommendations for fixing the problem, but I don't know what that would be short of repealing the Wild Horse and Burro Act, and with public opinion as it is and politicians sensitive to that fact, I don't see that happening. We can lobby for small improvements, but exponential population growth doesn't call for small improvements, it calls for major changes.

## DBC Officers and Technical Staff Members

The Council Officers and Technical Staff members are as follows:

Council Chair:	Dustin Shaible
Vice-chair:	Justin Shannon
Secretary:	Amber Munig
Treasurer:	Kathy Longshore
Transactions Editor:	James Cain
Tech Staff Chair:	Clay Brewer
Tech Staff:	Ray Lee, Mark Jorgensen, Mara Weisenberger, Brian Wakeling, Patrick Cummings, and Ben Gonzales



Interested in the Desert Bighorn Council?  
Questions about our organization or any of our projects?  
Please contact us – we'll be happy to answer your questions.

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