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Interior Secretary Wants to Move Surplus Population of Wild Horses from West to East at a Cost of \$96 Million

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By Adam Brickley

(CNSNews.com) – Saying that “we have a huge problem in America today” with wild horses and burros, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar on Wednesday asked Congress to buy land to create two new “national wild horse preserves” for 37,000 horses. The estimated cost is \$96 million.

Salazar said the new preserves would relocate the horses from land in the western United States, where they are said to contribute to overgrazing, to more lush areas in the East.

“We would look, in particular, to establish national wild horse preserves on productive lands of the Midwest and the East, where there is more water and more forage than there is in the arid lands of many places like Arizona and Nevada and New Mexico and other places across the West,” said Salazar, a former U.S. senator from Colorado.

The plan immediately drew heavy criticism, infuriating both horse advocates and proponents of controlling horse populations.

“We have a very huge problem in America today, and that is that we have out of control populations of wild horses and burros on our public lands,” Salazar said during a Wednesday conference call. “And it’s a problem that has been simmering and growing over time, and it’s time for us to land on a long-term solution.”

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) spokesman Tom Gorey broke down the plan in an interview with CNSNews.com.

“The scenario that we’re talking about is seven (proposed) preserves, of which the BLM would buy two, and then the others would be done with partners,” Gorey said. Five other wild horse preserves would be created using private money, he said.

The Interior Department doesn’t know where it is going to put the horses yet--or even how big the preserves would actually be.

“We don’t know where these (preserves) would be located, but what we’re dealing with is real estate and that’s, you know, it’s a dynamic of its own,” Gorey said.

The size of the preserves is unclear, at this point.

“(W)e can’t break it down that finely. What we’re looking for is, though, a ranch that could accommodate at least 3,600 (horses),” Gorey told CNSNews.com

The horses would not be corralled. "Just like we have with our existing long-term pastures in Kansas and Oklahoma now, essentially the horses run free. There's enough grass.

"With the existing contracts that we have with the long-term pastures right now, we have over 200,000 acres for 22,000 horses. So they're in a free-roaming situation, but of course, strictly speaking, there's a fence. It's a piece of private property, and they have to keep all the horses within some confines - but that's a very open situation."

But the price tag is clear, Gorey said: \$93 million to buy the land, an additional \$3 million to make improvements--and annual maintenance costs of \$1.7 million.

However, Gorey said that the plan would eventually save taxpayers money. He noted that the BLM has already spent \$29 million dollars on short-term corrals and long-term pastures in 2009. These operations currently hold 32,000 of the nation's estimated 69,000 wild horses and burros.

Wild horse advocacy groups are incensed by the new proposal, saying that the horses should be free to roam their traditional habitat in the West.

Ginger Kathrens, an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker who heads the wild horse advocacy group The Cloud Foundation, made the case for releasing the horses in an interview with CNSNews.com.

"19.4 million acres have been taken away for (wild horse) use that were legally designated for them," she said, adding that, "if the government is truly concerned about the animals in holding, they need to let the healthiest of those animals go on some of the acreage that has been stolen over the last 35 years."

Kathrens also said that that much of the overgrazing problem was due to the government leasing public land for cattle grazing.

"How do you square having millions and millions of head of cattle, at least a hundred head of cattle to wild horse, and it's wild horses that are overgrazing public land?" she said.

Pro-horse groups are not the only ones expressing outrage. Randall O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, also blasted the idea--suggesting a different solution to the problem.

"I think we ought to go out and machine-gun them," O'Toole said in an interview with CNSNews.com. "They're not good for the land, they're not good for our economy, they're not good for taxpayers, they're just good for 13-year-old girls to think about."

O'Toole noted that BLM had considered euthanizing the animals because the cost to maintain them has risen dramatically.

"The problem is that horses are pretty and if they say 'We have an overpopulation of horses, let's kill some of

them,' then every second 13-year-old girl in the country will write letters to Congress and say, 'Don't kill the pretty horses,'" he said.

Rob Gordon, an analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said the most important fact to keep in mind is that the four largest federal land managing agencies--the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the Forest Service--control about 27.5 percent of the land mass of the United States.

"That's equivalent to the nations of France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, the United Kingdom, and several others combined. The idea that we need to expand that estate doesn't make sense," Gordon said.

"Right now, it's clearly demonstrable that much of the land that's already in the federal estate is poorly managed," he said. "The last thing you need to do when you can't keep your house in order is add to it."

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