



Wild and Feral Horses in New Mexico

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New Mexico State University – College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences hosted the **New Mexico Wild and Feral Horse Summit** in Albuquerque, New Mexico on August 11, 2017. The event was organized by Dr. Andres Cibils of the Department of Animal and Range Sciences, the Range Improvement Task Force and Dr. Jason Turner, Department of Extension Animal Sciences and Natural Resources. Natural resource managers representing tribal, federal, state and private organizations gathered to identify and discuss knowledge gaps and complexities associated with wild and feral horse management in New Mexico.

Concern regarding over-abundance of free-roaming horses and burros across western rangelands is increasingly recognized by natural resource managers in the western United States. Federally defined wild horses and feral horses in New Mexico are causing alarm among New Mexico's natural resources managers. A paucity of information on the current status of wild and feral horse populations fuels this concern. Animal welfare, checker-boarded land tenure, cultural issues, and advocacy contribute to the alarm and controversy surrounding their management. Concurrently, concern over impacts to rangeland ecosystems, wildlife habitat, agriculture, public safety, and rural economies contributes to the growing unease. With estimated annual population growth rates between 15 and 20%, horse-related management challenges continue to escalate. Reliable knowledge is needed on wild and feral horse abundance, distribution and impacts to rangeland ecosystems. This summit was an initial attempt to gather a diverse group of private, state, tribal and federal land managers to discuss wild and feral horse management. The primary objective was to identify knowledge gaps in the science, education, management and policy of wild and feral horse management in New Mexico. A related objective was to identify opportunities for collaboration among NMSU, land management agencies, and private land owners.

The symposium was organized to allow ample time to ask questions of each speaker and discuss issues related to the presentations and general concerns and experiences of attending natural resources managers. A luncheon was provided to facilitate continued discussion among smaller groups and develop relationships and pursue opportunities for collaboration among participants. A total of 94 participants attended the symposium. Participants represented several Native American tribes and pueblos, NM State Legislators, New Mexico Livestock Board, USDA Forest Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Natural Resources Conservation Service among others.

Following a brief introduction, Dr. Ralph Zimmerman, DVM, NM Livestock Board State Veterinarian, began with a presentation on the history of the horse in North America. He discussed evolutionary adaptations of the horse, extinctions of various horse lineages and distributions of horses on the North American continent through various epochs. Dr. Scott Bender, DVM, an independent veterinarian from the Four Corners region, spoke about the Navajo Nation's vaccination and micro-chipping program, permitted versus actual use, techniques and challenges of surgical and chemical reproductive management and operational and political challenges of horse roundups as well as other management tools. Dr. Tolani Francisco, DVM, with the USDA Forest Service discussed knowledge gaps in wild and feral horse management, animal welfare issues in relation to population densities and management, and detailed explanations of several population management techniques and their associated challenges. Mr. Jeff Tafoya and Ms. Angela Yemma of the Bureau of Land Management, Farmington Office presented data and related experiences in managing wild and feral horses on the Caracas Wild Horse Management Area and checker-board land-tenure areas, associated with BLM managed lands. They discussed observations on impacts of wild and feral horses on rangelands, sustainability of rangelands supporting overabundant horse populations, mule deer winter range and potential impacts to multiple-use landscapes.

Ample time was allocated for discussion after each presentation allowing natural resource managers to contribute to identifying knowledge gaps and challenges associated with managing wild and feral horses. Overarching issues discussed include:

- lack of reliable population estimates,
- cultural and political influence on management,
- need for science-based educational information,
- federal NEPA process in conducting horse management programs,
- inability to cull populations,
- lack of suitable markets to sell horses,
- horse slaughter and
- documenting impacts to rangeland ecosystems.

Research needs identified include:

- influence of Native American culture on feral horse management,
- effectiveness of current management strategies to manage horses,
- quantifying impacts to natural resources and related economies,
- horse distribution and movement,
- quantifying impacts to rangelands and
- quantifying recovery of rangelands following population management.

The response to the summit was positive with several requests for future meetings to continue progress made during this meeting. Plans are being made to host another meeting in the near future. We will keep you posted when a date and location have been identified. Please contact Sam Smallidge with any questions at 575-644-9566 or via email ssmallid@nmsu.edu.

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