

The Bureau of Land Management chronically underreports the extent of damage to public rangelands caused by livestock grazing.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) released a report in September that highlights the BLM's eagerness to blame wild horses for habitat degradation in western Utah, while systematically ignoring the larger role of cattle, which far outnumber wild horses.

The group's analysis of BLM rangeland health data, obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests, concluded livestock grazing was a significant cause of habitat degradation on a majority of lands where the BLM and the U.S. Geological Survey have publicly implicated wild horses in declines of sage grouse habitat.

"USGS and BLM have put on scientific blinders when it comes to public lands grazing," said Kirsten Stade, PEER's special projects manager. "While wild horses do have impacts of their own, coherent landscape and recovery planning require a hard look at the millions of cows foraging increasingly stressed rangelands."

A recent USGS study found that by 2034 sage grouse numbers could drop by upward of 70% if wild horse populations continue their unbridled growth at current rates. But, Stade noted that cattle outnumber wild horses on the West's public lands **30 to 1**. Within the BLM's designated wild horse "herd management areas," or HMAs, the ratio is about **9 to 1**, depending on the time of year.

Over the past two years, the BLM has rounded up about a third of the horses roaming freely in Utah, putting them up for adoption or incarcerating them for life in contract corrals and pastures, courtesy of U.S. taxpayers. To justify the roundups, the agency often cited the dire conditions of drought-depleted rangelands.

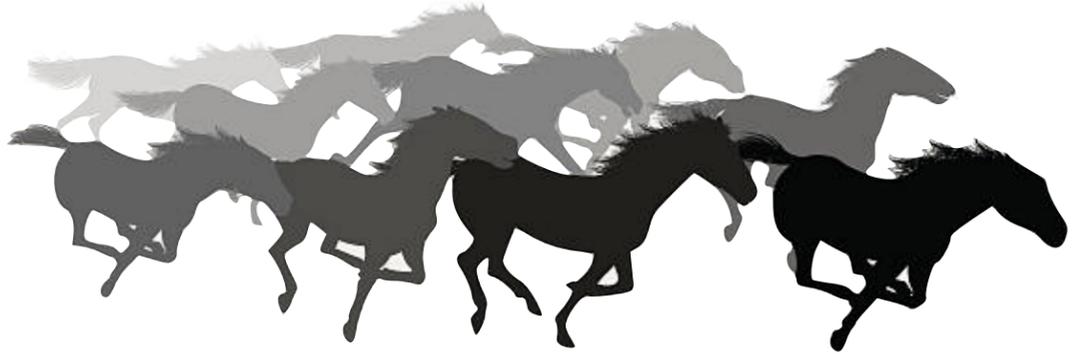
Last year, the BLM removed **1,824 horses** from five HMAs and another 525 this year, most of those from the beloved Onaqui herd that roam around the Onaqui Mountains about 60 miles southwest of Salt Lake City. According to the BLM's latest count, about 4,121 wild horses and burros inhabit Utah's 19 herd management areas totaling 2.5 million acres.

Most of these HMAs are on lands overseen by the BLM's Fillmore field office, which has sponsored five horse roundups since 2020.

In most instances, the BLM claimed excessive horse numbers were damaging rangelands. The BLM's former acting director William Perry Pendley, who served during the last two years of the Trump administration and oversaw a dramatic increase in roundups, characterized wild horses as an "existential threat" to rangeland health — even though free-roaming horses are protected under federal law.

Environmentalists and horse advocates dispute Pendley's assertions since cattle have such a larger presence on these lands than horses.

Under BLM policies, the agency is to conduct periodic rangeland health assessments on the thousands of public land grazing allotments, according to Peter Lattin, a former BLM contractor that PEER hired to analyze the data. These assess-



BLM BLAMES WILD HORSES FOR CATTLE GRAZING IMPACT

ments are done to determine a rangelands' watershed functionality, nutrient cycling, water quality and habitat quality, and to identify the reasons why a range may be substandard.

Based on a review of BLM's own records, PEER said 40 million acres of federal lands fail to meet standards for water, vegetation, soils and ability to support wildlife because of overgrazing. PEER stitched the data into one big data set and organized it into a map posted online.

"BLM's handling of information about unsustainable livestock practices has been the antithesis of sound science,"

PEER executive director Tim Whitehouse wrote in a letter to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland. The agency consistently excludes the consideration of livestock grazing as a possible reason why landscapes have changed across six eco-regions in the West, he alleged.

"We have been able to find no evidence that BLM has conducted any such analysis of its own, however, or even reviewed the data, or, most importantly, used it to guide land management decision-making," Whitehouse's letter continued. "While wild horses certainly impact sage grouse habitat, to focus conservation efforts for this habitat on addressing impacts made by thousands of wild horses, while ignoring troves of data on the impacts from millions of cattle, undermines your efforts to create a culture of scientific integrity at DOI."

Reports generated by BLM's Fillmore office, which administers most of Utah's horse management areas, paint a suspiciously rosy picture of rangeland health, according to the PEER analysis. BLM data indicates that nearly all rangelands meet standards in Beaver and Millard counties, but just across the Nevada state line the rangelands do not meet standards, according to Lattin.

Utah lands are probably not in better shape, he said. A more likely explanation is the Utah field office is not doing its job since it is obvious the rangelands in these counties are not in good health and livestock grazing is having an impact, Lattin argues.

"The [Fillmore] office reports that just 1% of the allotments by acreage fail to meet standards due to grazing, in an eco-region with a livestock failure rate of 49%," he said.

The analysis points to a double standard when it comes to assessing the impacts of foraging ungulates: **Wild horses and burros get blamed when rangelands suffer, while domestic livestock get a pass.**

The most controversial Utah roundup in years targeted the Onaqui herd, which is overseen by the BLM's Salt Lake field office. That sprawling HMA overlaps 10 grazing allotments, four of which the BLM data indicate are failing to meet standards for rangeland health.

"One of these identifies livestock, as well as wild horses, as a cause for this failure, but its categorization of the allotment's health deliberately obscures the livestock impact and attributes all the damage to factors other than livestock," Stade wrote in an email.

"Given its pattern of denying grazing impacts, it is hard to take Interior's pledge to be guided by the best science seriously," added Stade, pointing to worsening drought conditions throughout the West. "Despite the unmistakable red flags, Interior is not even studying, let alone planning, any widespread, programmatic changes in livestock stocking rates or management to prevent further sage grouse decline."

Horse advocates cited the new report to renew their insistence the BLM should jettison its reliance on costly helicopter horse roundups in favor of fertility control for keeping horse numbers in check.

"The BLM's bias against wild horses and its continued failure to address the threat of livestock to Western public lands is harming wildlife and the environment," said Suzanne Roy, executive director of the American Wild Horse Campaign. "We implore Secretary Haaland to rein in the mismanaged agency and to stop scapegoating the very animal it is charged to protect, wild horses. In order to do that, the BLM cannot continue to ignore its own scientific findings on the adverse impacts of public lands livestock grazing."

In a Sept. 9 letter to Haaland, the Sierra Club called on the Interior secretary to eliminate livestock grazing in herd management areas, tying such a move to accomplishing the goals of President Joe Biden's "30 by 30" conservation initiative pointing out that:

"Addressing livestock-induced-ecological problems within BLM Herd Management Areas would potentially restore the ability of these lands to sequester carbon, help climate stabilization efforts, improve riparian conditions and water quality and also address biodiversity issues,"

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A Warning For All

"We must answer their call. Our Mother Earth, militarized, fenced-in, poisoned, a place where basic rights are systematically violated, demands that we take action. Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a dignified way, in a way that protects life. Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of the Earth and of its spirits."

— Berta Caceres, Indigenous rights and environmental activist of the Lenca people, murdered in Honduras in 2016

If there is one glaring truth of the 21st century, it is that Indigenous people are at the forefront of a war being waged against the living earth itself. From the Athabasca to the Niger Delta to the Ecuadorian Amazon, the fossil fuel industry, along with other extractive industries, are drenched in the blood of countless innocent people and responsible for ecological annihilation on a scale that is unimaginable. With all of this comes global impunity. These industries enjoy legal protection from the most powerful state entities on earth. Their crimes, of which we are all a victim, go unpunished.

There are few better examples of how the fossil fuel industry operates with impunity than in Chevron-Texaco's deliberate destruction of the Ecuadorian Amazon, often referred to as the "Amazon Chernobyl" due to the scale of the catastrophe.

From 1964 to 1992 Texaco, the company acquired by Chevron with all of its liabilities, polluted a 1700 square mile swath of pristine rainforest. In its lust for profits, the company cut corners and dumped at least 19 billion gallons of toxic water into the environment. It discharged 17 million gallons of crude into unlined pits, some as deep as 30 feet, on the forest floor. There is no telling how many species succumbed to the horrors of such unbridled greed.

But this is also a story of environmental racism. For decades, Indigenous people of this region were told that the oil was no threat to them. On the contrary, many of them were told that it had medicinal value and contained "vitamins." Thousands of people used that water. They drank it, cooked with it, bathed in it, oblivious to the danger. After seeing a spike in birth defects and cancers, that danger became increasingly clear. Unable to relocate because of crushing, imposed poverty, they are forced to live in this human-made disaster area, even though it is slowly killing them.

Despite losing its legal battle, as well as an appeal to the highest court in Ecuador which ordered them to pay 9.5 billion USD for clean up and healthcare for the communities affected by its crime, Chevron has yet to pay a dime. Even the Hague, that supposed bastion of justice that wastes no time prosecuting African dictators, sided with Chevron's corporate criminals.

And the company has done everything it can to persecute its victims, and hold them responsible for its own malfeasance. It has ruthlessly gone after the Indigenous people who dared oppose it, as well as their defenders. One is human rights lawyer, Steven Donziger, who won the case against Chevron. He has been under house arrest for nearly 600 days due to a spurious charge by a judge well known to be in the pocket of Big Business.

On October 1st, a judge sentenced Donziger to the maximum penalty of six months in prison for contempt of court—linked to a lawsuit brought by Chevron, which targeted Donziger ever since he successfully sued the oil giant in Ecuador on behalf of Indigenous people.

Indeed, Chevron is attempting to use an American statute, once reserved for prosecuting the Mafia, on Indigenous land and water defenders, environmentalists, and anyone who stands in solidarity with them. The ramifications for this are, of course, chilling to say the least. If they succeed, there is nothing to stop other corporate abusers in going after Indigenous people elsewhere, or other human and environmental rights activists.

Of course Chevron is not alone. The industries responsible for carving the great, festering wound in the living loam of the earth, known as the Alberta Tar Sands, have managed to suppress information regarding adverse health affects on Indigenous people in that region for many years. Even in this case, it is environmental racism writ large with health authorities blaming Indigenous people's illnesses on "poor eating habits, obesity and smoking" rather than the obvious pollution being spewed into the atmosphere or poured into waterways from nearby plants. They routinely side with Big Oil against Indigenous people and the biosphere in one of the most green-washed countries in the world.

And in the Niger Delta, one of the most important wetland regions on the planet, Royal Dutch Shell has been systematically devastating wildlife and water for decades with near impunity. Gas flares contaminate the air with benzene, causing birth defects and cancer among the Indigenous communities. Over the past fifty years an estimated 1.5 million tons of oil has spilled into the ecosystem.

Shell's ecological destruction goes hand in hand with its brutal suppression of human rights. Its presence in the Niger Delta has brought deforestation, water pollution and poverty. Nearly 85 percent of all oil revenues go to less than 1% of the population in a country where, according to the African Development Bank, more than 70 percent live on less than one US dollar per day.

None of this would be possible without the marriage of the corporation and the state. Shell has had a long history of assisting and directing the Nigerian military in the violent suppression of dissent and protest; and Indigenous environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa presented a problem to the oil giant in that he organized defiance of their destruction of Ogoni lands. On November 10, 1995, Saro-Wiwa was among nine other Ogoni activists murdered after being convicted in a kangaroo court at the behest of the company. Today, the plunder and devastation of the Niger Delta continues.

For decades fossil fuel industries, as well as other extractive companies and corporations, have managed to wreak devastation on our fragile biosphere with no consequence for their crimes. Indeed, they have succeeded in controlling a weak global judiciary beholden to corporate interests. But humanity is in an existential crisis like never before. We can no longer stand idly by while the corporate state ravages our world and our future before our eyes. Indigenous people have been calling for us to recognize the deathward trajectory of our political and economic order for centuries. And if we continue to ignore their plea for sanity it will be at our collective peril.

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