

Sage grouse, wild horses dominate BLM budget

By Martin Griffith, AP

RENO -- Wild-horse fertility control and sage-grouse habitat conservation are among top priorities in the proposed \$1.1 billion budget for the federal Bureau of Land Management.

President Obama's request for the 2015 fiscal year calls for an increase of \$2.8 million in funding for the agency's wild horse and burro program, and would allow it to continue studies to develop more effective contraceptive drugs and techniques.

The BLM has pledged to step up the use of fertility control as an alternative to controversial roundups of what it calls overpopulated mustang herds on U.S. rangelands in the West.

If approved by Congress, the request would further the BLM's implementation of recommendations made by an independent panel of the National Academy of Sciences in 2013, agency officials said.

In a report highly critical of the BLM, the panel said the agency should invest in widespread fertility control of the mustangs instead of spending millions to house them.

It concluded the BLM's removal of nearly 100,000 horses from the Western range over the past decade is probably having the opposite effect of its intention to ease ecological damage and reduce overpopulated herds.

The BLM treated about 1,000 mares in 2012 but only about half that last year, records show, far short of the annual goal of 2,000 then-BLM Director Bob Abbey announced in 2011.

Anne Novak of California-based Protect Mustangs questioned the

value of fertility control and called on Congress to embrace “holistic” land management by keeping mustangs on the range to rebuild soil and reverse desertification. She thinks the agency’s horse roundups have caused the herds to have an increased birthrate.

“Throwing more drugs, sterilizations and pesticides on native wild horses is a backwards approach,” Novak said. “It’s time to help our American wild horses contribute to the thriving natural balance of the ecosystem using fresh science.”

The budget also seeks to maintain funding for the BLM’s initiative to conserve sage-grouse habitat across the West to avoid the bird’s listing as an endangered or threatened species. The agency plans to complete the plan in the upcoming fiscal year. Such a listing would have economic consequences for ranching, mining and alternative energy development across large swaths of land.

Another top budget priority is authorization of a nonprofit foundation to help provide the BLM with new ways to work with the public on landscapes and programs, including wild horse and burro management.

“The BLM carries a great responsibility in its stewardship of roughly 10 percent of the nation’s land,” BLM Principal Deputy Director Neil Kornze said in a statement. “We strive each day to strike the right balance under our multiple use and sustained yield mandate.”

Kornze testified on the budget at a hearing Friday before the House Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies.