

# Trail to a new home

**The BLM commitment to place wild horses and burros into adopted homes is a deep one. Amy Dumas shares details on the path from the range to the stable.**

**HT:** What is the Bureau of Land Management's function when it comes to wild horses and burros?

**AMY:** The BLM was tasked to manage the wild horses and burros by Congress in 1971 with the passage of the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burros Act. With that, the Congress designated the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service of the USDA to manage wild horses and burros on the lands where they were found in 1971.

**HT:** And how's that working for them?

**AMY:** We have been highly successful in protecting these animals. The Act protects the animals from capture, harassment, branding on the range, and a few other things. So, I think we've done a pretty good job of doing that.

**HT:** And what was the purpose of the government getting involved to manage these animals?

**AMY:** The BLM's mission is to manage the lands that are in its purview for multiple use. Some are uses — like mining, recreation, and livestock — that require permits and are intensely managed. But much of our mission is to manage the resources that use or make up that land, such as the vegetation, the wild horses and burros, the wilderness. We are here to manage and protect that land for all users in perpetuity, whether they are a permitted user or a resource.

**HT:** So you manage the adoption aspect of these animals. What is it like for the animals that are on the range?



**AMY:** In California, we manage all facets of the program, except for long-term pastures. We have animals on the range, two preparation (for adoption) corrals, one jail training facility, an adoption program, and volunteers. We have horses, burros, and two areas that have mules. Most of the wild horses and burros are found in 10 Western states. The horses live primarily in the Great Basin Desert, and the burros are primarily in the hotter deserts — the Mojave and Chihuahuan deserts, for example. In the wild, the horses and burros on the range spend their days looking for food and water, reproducing — just living and surviving. Much like any other wild animal.

**HT:** Who decided where these animals could live?

**AMY:** Congress. The animals can live where they were found at the passage of the Act in 1971. These designated areas are called herd areas. The herd areas are all on public lands, referring to BLM lands. Where we are actively managing these animals are called herd management areas, which are located within

the designated herd areas. We must manage not only the animals, but also their habitat because that is the BLM land management's primary mission.

**HT:** Sure, it's where they are grazing. That's where they get their food and water. There's not a whole lot to eat, so you have to determine how many head per acre. Just as the permitted users can only have a certain number of cattle if they are running cattle out there per acre, based upon the vegetation.

**AMY:** Not only the vegetation and the productivity of the land, but also the water. Water is a very limiting resource out in the desert, as you are well aware. Sometimes people are under the false impression that we have lands that are covered in Kentucky bluegrass, for example. This is not the East Coast where they have water and rain. This is the desert where forage is limited and forage production is limited — as is water. Those are two of our biggest limiting factors that determine how many animals can be out there. We also must keep in mind every-

thing that is using the resources, as part of the multiple-use mission.

**HT:** How do you regulate the population of these wild animals?

**AMY:** The wild horses and burros do remarkably well out in the desert despite the pretty harsh conditions under which they live. The burros actually evolved in the hot deserts in north Africa, so they are very well-suited to the areas in which they live. The horses have adapted very well to where they live. They don't have many predators these days to help keep the herds in check. The BLM tries to reduce the numbers to a level where the animals will not damage their habitat. We do that to protect the herds and the habitat in which the animals live. If you have too many animals out there, they end up overgrazing the habitat, or there may not be enough water for them, or other wildlife, and the animals suffer. That's not what we want to happen. Our job is to make sure that these animals do not suffer and always have a place to live in the wild.

**HT:** The fact that they are reproducing so rapidly puts them in a position of needing management.

**AMY:** Because these animals are so fecund, the BLM has to remove some of them. Otherwise, they damage their habitat, and could suffer from lack of food and/or water. BLM hires contractors to gather these animals to reduce the population numbers. We use a helicopter because we are covering a lot of land where the animals live. The helicopter pilot is very aware of the horses' behaviors and the herd behaviors, and uses the helicopter much like a shepherd uses a sheep dog — like a border collie — to move the herd. The pilot, because the helicopter can hover and move slowly, pushes the horses or burros at a very slow pace, a walk or trot, until they are pushed into what we call a trap. A trap consists of a jute wings about a quarter-mile long that form a funnel that lead into a corral. When the animals are in the funnel, the pilot pushes the horses at a faster pace, like a canter, so the animals don't turn around. When they enter the corral, we shut the gate and allow them to settle.

At the trap, we sort the foals into their own pen, so they don't get hurt at the pen or on the trailer. We ship the foals in their own compartment with their dams in the adjacent compartment. Then, we'll take the animals to

a holding facility where we sort through them more thoroughly. The mares and stallions are separated. The mares are joined with the foals. We determine which animals we will remove and offer up for adoption, and which ones that we'll turn back to the wild to continue reproducing and making the next generation of wild horses or burros.

These gathers are open for the public to watch and anyone can contact a local BLM to find out when gathers are occurring.

**HT:** What factors determine whether one is going back to where it came from... or to a little girl in Perris, California?

**AMY:** Those decisions are made by local specialists. Sometimes those decisions are based on historical characteristics of the herd. It could be based on conformation, temperament — things like that that people select for.

**HT:** A horse that gets turned back — is it turned back for conformation for selection?

**AMY:** It could be. I've talked with specialists, and as you know, every horseperson has their own opinion. I've talked to people who have been in the program a long time. One said, 'if the horse stood quietly in the chute, we turned it out.' So he was selecting for quiet horses. I've seen people pick for size — they think adopters want big horses, for example, so they would pick the larger, better-conformed horses, or the better-behaved horses. Sometimes they'll select for color if the herd is known for its color.

**HT:** It's almost like they are selecting the best of the breed. And they are going to take the other ones out and quite possibly will end up gelding them and putting them up for hopeful adoption.

**AMY:** Exactly.

**HT:** Once horses are selected for adoption consideration, what gets them to the next level?

**AMY:** At the gathers, once we have the horses sorted into pens, and then we load them up on the trucks, straight-deck trucks, and we ship them to our preparation facilities. In California we have two of those — one in Litchfield outside of Susanville, and another one in Ridgecrest. There, the animals are vaccinated, dewormed, the boys are gelded,

and we put a freeze mark on them using liquid nitrogen.

Every animal that the BLM has gathered has a freeze mark that consists of eight characters and a 'U', which is our registered brand on their left neck. Each one of those characters is an alpha-angle system — it stands for a number, zero to nine. So, each animal has its own unique freeze mark number. Our facilities are open to the public to visit or adopt an animal. We ask that people make appointments to adopt animals. We want to ensure that the adopter gets excellent service when choosing their animal.

*(EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of COVID, corals are currently closed for adoption, but should be opening soon. BLM personnel are still working and can be reached via phone or email to find out dates of re-opening.)*

**HT:** You said on a flat-deck truck. A lot of people think they get hauled in a double-deck, which is a cattle truck, but that's just not the case, is it.

**AMY:** No, that's not the case. Straight deck trucks and stock horse trailers are what we use to move the animals.

**HT:** As I understand, the freeze brands are large enough well they can be seen by the helicopter in future gatherings. Is that the case?

**AMY:** When we turn horses back, we sometimes will put a freeze mark on its hip with a letter or a number that lets us know that that animal has been gathered at a certain time or place. But not every horse that is turned back is freeze-marked. Only the animals that we bring in for adoption are definitely freeze-marked on their neck before they go out for adoption.

Once the animals get to our preparation facilities, they are usually kept in a pen. And when I say a pen, we are talking about a pen that is acres big — we're not talking about a little 12x12 stall where they are singularly housed. Our horses and burros are kept in big social groups in single sexes. Mares and jennies that have foals or are due to foal are kept in their own pens, what we call our "foaling pens."

**HT:** That's just one of the things that I had heard, like so many other rumors that float around about the BLM and the Mustang round-ups and such. I didn't know what the facts were on that one.

**AMY:** If you ever hear rumors, call the BLM. We can answer your questions.

**HT:** What happens to the ones that are not adoptable?

**AMY:** If a horse is deemed “unadoptable” — maybe because it is too old — we have contracted pastures that are thousands of acres in Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and that’s where we ship the horses that are unadoptable. They live in single-sex pastures and they just live out their lives there.

**HT:** Can I go?

**AMY:** You can! Let me put a freeze mark on you...

**HT:** Let’s move on to the adoption. What is that process? Who are the lucky ones who get that? How do you become a lucky one?

**AMY:** How you become a lucky one is you get a great adopter. Once the horses are ready to go to an adoption — they’ve had their vaccination protocol, the boys are gelded, they all are freeze-marked, dewormed and ready to go — the horses or burros can then be shipped cross-country to one of our adoptions — for example, back east. We have adoptions all over the country. In California, we may come to a local city in the state somewhere. Another benefit of living in California is adopters can come to our corrals and pick an animal...or let an animal pick them.

Our corral staff pick out which animals they bring to the adoptions in the communities. Depending on where the adoption is and how many they need, they’ll sort through and see which horses are ready, which are up-to-date, for example on their Coggins or other vaccinations.

**HT:** Now they are ready for adoption, and here I come with my two little kids with me. Who qualifies to be an adopter?

**AMY:** That’s a good question. You have to be 18 years old. You have to have no history of inhumane treatment or no convictions of cruelty to animals, and you have to have

the proper facilities and be able to tell us that you are able to take care of one of these animals.

We have an adoption application that everyone fills out. You can do it in about 10 minutes; it’s not like doing your taxes. We need to see that the adopter is able to provide a safe home and provide proper care for this animal. When you adopt a horse or burro from us, the government retains ownership of that animal for the first year. We

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do that because we want to make sure that it’s a good match for the adopter. We know people’s lives change. We also know that sometimes the horse and the person don’t necessarily match up very well. The adoption process allows people to get to know their animals. We want to make sure that it’s going to be a successful adoption. There are also some regulations for the care of the animal. People cannot sell or give away the animal. If they move the animal, they need to let BLM know. They have to have proper facilities that provide a safe environment for the animal. They have to let us know that they know how to feed an animal. All the adoption requirements are on our website.

At the end of the year, if the animal has received proper care, we confer title to the adopter, and once the person gets title to that animal, it becomes that person’s private property. Then the horse or burro is no longer protected by the Act.

**HT:** What type of person should I be to take on a horse that has come from the wild and is undoubtedly not halter broke or could even be touched?

**AMY:** You should be the kind of person who is willing to learn, who has a passion for horsemanship and wants to really take your horsemanship to a higher level, because these horses will teach you all kinds of things about your horsemanship and yourself. They are really amazing animals because they are a blank slate. You are not going to have to figure out that, ‘oh, somebody did this to this horse in its previous life, and I have to now deal with it.’ If you consider yourself a decent trainer or somebody who really has a good grasp of horse behavior, you could be an awesome adopter. Training a wild one is very different than training a domestic one. These horses know nothing about being around people nor have they ever had a halter on. We are talking completely untouched. You can go far with an untouched animal if you are willing to learn, listen to the animal, and perhaps think a little differently about training a horse.

**HT:** Those are the ones that I often wonder — just how far can they go, because these can be a handful. Even the ones that are somewhat trained. We see all of these contests that promote the adoptions, the Mustang challenges. Corporate America has gotten involved because everybody wants to see this succeed, but I’m not sure if they want to go see the success or if they want to, like NASCAR, go to see the wrecks.

**AMY:** The people who want to see the wrecks are not the horsepeople. The horsepeople come to see how much these trainers have done with their horses, not the other way around. The horsepeople are interested in the horses and are really interested in the behavior and the training and all the things that comes with becoming a good horseperson. They want to see this succeed. They often come to see what the trainers have created for their finales, because some of them are quite amazing!

The general public has the idea that these horses are a handful or can be difficult, like you’ve mentioned. Some of the horses can be — just like any breed of horse — but many of them aren’t because if the person understands the horse and is able to read the

horse. They can create an incredible relationship, an incredible bond. That bond is one of the things that's quite different about these Mustangs than their domestic counterparts.

I have been around horses since I was three years old. I grew up riding hunters, and Thoroughbreds were very popular where I lived. I did not even know about the wild ones. In college, we had a lab in my equine science class where somebody showed us liberty work — free lunging, they called it. I was a sophomore in college. I didn't realize that five years later what a huge impact that would be on my life when I first got introduced to these wild horses. All the liberty work and round-pen training really does work with these animals, but if you don't understand how it works, it can make connecting with a wild one much more challenging.

**HT:** Horses and burros are herd animals and they are always looking for the leader and someone to take the responsibility to make sure they are safe. When they can trust the human to be the leader, then they will just wrap themselves around you and develop a bond.

**AMY:** They do tend to bond. They can make a very strong bond, which is also kind of fun. It can also be, if the horse is going to be moving along, something to keep in mind. If it's going to bond to you, and you know that you are going to sell it after its titled, then you want to make sure it gets introduced to other people and things. Socialize it.

**HT:** Well, we appreciate you socializing with us from the Bureau of Land Management

**AMY:** I appreciate you wanting to socialize with us! For adoptions we do have options if you do not want to start one from scratch.

**HT:** Let's say that I am not that adept and maybe a little fearful. What programs do you have that might help me in the training of these animals.

**AMY:** We have two great programs to get horses or burros that have some training. We have a partner called the Mustang Heritage

Foundation, and they do the Extreme Mustang Makeovers as well as what they call a Trainer Incentive Program, or the T.I.P. program. T.I.P. animals are halter-trained, so they can be haltered, you can pick up their feet, you can catch them and load them into a trailer. You can take them to a boarding facility, let's say, and then you can train them to do whatever you want.

They have the Extreme Mustang Makeover



where the trainers are matched up randomly with horses from the BLM and they have 100 days to train these horses and show what they can do in 100 days with these horses — and what they can do is pretty amazing. I've heard people say they've had their horses for five years and can't get them to do what these trainers did in 100 days on horses that have never been handled. It is highly impressive. You can check out some performances on YouTube.

Another option is we have inmate training programs where inmates - in California, for example, at the Rio Cosumnes Correction Center in Elk Grove — work with the horses for three to four months and then offer them up for adoption. Those horses are saddle-started or green but they have about 120 prison days on them. The trainers are in jail, so they have nothing but time, and these horses are worked several hours a day. It's another excellent way to get a horse that is saddle-started and has a good foundation to take into any discipline that you might want to do.

**HT:** So the horses come out of the wild, they

go through the process, and then they go to jail, then they get out of jail. These horses that come out of jail have a reasonable amount of time under saddle. Those are the horses I want to go to next.

**AMY:** We have I believe six programs in the country. California has the one in Elk Grove, and there's one nearby in Carson City. It's a win for everybody involved. The horses come out saddle-trained, and hopefully go to a good adopter; the BLM is able to find homes for the horses so we can manage them better on the range; the inmates hopefully become better members of society — we have seen that they have much lower recidivism rates coming out of that program. Our website has more information on those programs. It also has more information on where to adopt, when the BLM will be hosting events in communities around the country, fact and statistics, adoption applications, and a host of other program information.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:**

*This interview by John DeBevoise for Horsetrader Media was one of 19 in the live Horsetrader Media Studio during three days of the Western States Horse Expo Pomona last November. For additional information on Horsetrader Media, send us an email to: [contact@horsetradermedia.com](mailto:contact@horsetradermedia.com). We'd love to share our new media products!*

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