

Fact Sheet

Sonora Wild Horse Repatriation Project

Sponsors: Merle Edsall of Avon, Montana, USA
Humberto de Hoyos of Cananea, Sonora, Mexico
Johannes von Trapp of Stowe, Vermont, USA
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The Proposed Project: The proponents propose to establish a Sonora Wild Horse Sanctuary of up to 10,000 wild horses within the upper San Pedro River Basin in Sonora, Mexico. (Recent comments by the proponents indicate the area may be expanded to include a portion of the Santa Cruz River Basin in Sonora, Mexico). Forty acres per horse would be allocated. Thus, up to 400,000 acres would be included in the Sanctuary. The herd would be managed by vaqueros, who would ride the Sanctuary every day to assure the horses are in their proper grazing area. The herd would also be managed by helicopters. About one percent of the horses would be trained and returned to the United States for adoption or sale. The remainder would live out their lives in the Sanctuary. A small number of goats and sheep would be used to control weeds, but no cattle would be included in the Sanctuary. Interior fences would be removed to allow more freedom for grazing and movement of the herd. A wild horse adoption program and a tourist center near Palominas, Arizona are proposed as revenue generators.

Source of Horses: Wild horses are periodically gathered from lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the western United States where they are in excess of the area's carrying capacity. In most cases, these horses are sold at auction in the United States or adopted to United States citizens for \$125 each. Horses proposed to be used in the Sonora Wild Horse Repatriation Project would be the older horses and those considered un-adoptable.

Size of the San Pedro River Basin in Sonora, Mexico: 448,000 acres (1,795 sq. km.), including the towns of Naco and Cananea, the Cananea copper mine, all or part of five ejidos (rural cooperative communities), several working ranches, and agricultural lands.

Status: The United States Department of the Interior Office of the Solicitor issued an opinion on December 19, 2002, that the proposal is not legal. It stated, "The BLM is not authorized to contract for a long-term sanctuary to care for animals protected by Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act ("Act") in a foreign country because that would put the animals outside the jurisdiction of the United States. The proposed transfer to Mexico would strip the animals of the protection of the Act's criminal penalties." This proposal is not approved by BLM or the Department of the Interior. Despite statements on the part of project sponsors that they do have BLM approval, the BLM's official position is that they are giving the proposal no consideration at this time.

Water consumption by horses: According to some experts, a 1,000-pound horse is estimated to need approximately 10 gallons of water per day, or 3,650 gallons per year. Thus, 10,000 horses would need 100,000 gallons per day, or 36,510,000 gallons (112 acre-feet) per year in a region that is already experiencing drought and over-allocation of water resources.

Ability of the area to support 10,000 horses: Project sponsors hired Jerry Holechek, Ph.D., from New Mexico State University, to review and make a recommendation for the project. He concluded that the project "is very well suited for wild horse grazing" and that it "could greatly enhance rangeland condition and productivity over the next 10 years." However, to date, the project has not been approved by any Mexican institutions that are in a position grant the necessary permits. Biologists from IMADES had an opportunity to review the Sonora Wildhorse Project proposal and determined that they could not support the project due to the potential impacts to grassland habitats. Biologists with the Reserva Ajos-Bavispe/SEMARNAT also reviewed the proposal and came to the same conclusion.

Both Mexican and United States biologists on the Sonoran Joint Venture Technical Committee conclude that the grasslands and associated habitats (riparian and wetlands) in the San Pedro and Santa Cruz watersheds being considered for this project have already been compromised by livestock grazing and a prolonged drought. Placing a large number of horses on the land, even if cattle are removed, would only exacerbate the current situation. These watersheds have been recognized for their high wildlife values and have been designated as high priority sites for protection and restoration initiatives. For example, in the last few years, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum researchers have identified over 175 species of plants in the Sonoran borderlands which are unusual for one reason or another. Forty-three of these species are the first reports for Sonora, and thirteen are firsts for Mexico. The many ongoing and planned habitat protection and restoration projects that currently exist in the region would be threatened or destroyed by the proposed wild horse project.

Sources:
Sierra Vista Herald, January 6, 2003
August 27, 2003 public meeting, Sierra Vista, Arizona