



TESTIMONY OF
ROY B. BROWN
CHAIRMAN, NORTHERN ARAPAHO

BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
“KEEP WHAT YOU CATCH: PROMOTING TRADITIONAL SUBSISTENCE ACTIVITIES IN NATIVE
COMMUNITIES.”

JUNE 20, 2018

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon Chairman Hoven, Vice-Chairman Udall and members of the Committee. Thank you for holding this oversight hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify. My name is Roy Brown. It is my honor to represent the Northern Arapaho Tribe as Chairman.

BACKGROUND

The Wind River Reservation is located in west-central Wyoming and, for generations, has been the home of two sovereign nations, the Northern Arapaho and the Eastern Shoshone Tribes. The Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone are unique in that we are the only separate sovereign tribes who share jurisdiction and ownership of the same Reservation. Today I share the perspective of the Northern Arapaho Tribe. The Reservation is over 2.2 million acres of gorgeous wide-open spaces with an abundance of natural resources, plants, and wildlife which are central to our culture and traditions. For this reason, we are very protective of the land and resources the land provides. We have encountered several threats to these natural resources throughout the years and have learned to adapt and manage so that our tribal citizens may still enjoy the full benefit of what the land provides. One recent threat that is currently changing the landscape of the reservation is the invasion of wild and feral horses.

In 2012, the Tribes and the Wyoming Fish and Wildlife Service, in separate surveys, estimated there were over 2,100 hoses in the lower mountainous areas in the northwest portion of the reservation. Today, our best estimates are that there are over 6,500 horses in the wilderness of the reservation. As the wild and feral horse population increases, their impact to the natural resources, and thus our way of life, becomes more and more critical.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF INVASIVE HORSES

The emergence of this problem can likely be attributed to a number of factors. Wild horses have been able to thrive because of lack of natural predators, little to no human contact, and the abundance of forage after the area recovered from a long drought. Additionally, the lack of adequate horse markets

in the last decade suppressed the horse industry and created a market where only the most desirable horses would have buyers which has resulted in more feral horses. Individuals with horse ownership could no longer market aggressive or untrainable horses. The cost of horse ownership becomes particularly burdensome if the horse is injured, sick, old, or untrainable. These horses are sometimes let out in the wilderness near or within the reservation boundary.

Which leads to another contributing factor. Wind River Fish and Game department has the budget to hire three wardens, one of whom serves as the Director of the program and carries out day-to-day administrative tasks. Three wardens to patrol 2.2 million acres, the vast majority of it wilderness, has not proven to be effective in catching or deterring domestic horse abandonment.

ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS

As the horse herds increase in numbers, so does the negative impacts to the environment. The horses will take every opportunity to overgraze on grasslands they come across. A herd of horses can decimate the natural grasses and forbs not only through eating but by eroding the ground to the extent the plants are unable to grow back. The overgrazing leads to noxious weed infestation, long-term or permanent loss of native grass and forb species, and sedimentation and topsoil loss. The reservation, particularly the northwestern portion, has many areas that used to be grasslands but are now eroded to point where only weeds and other invasive plants can grow. Other ecologically related impacts are loss of naturalized water such as springs, downcutting or downsizing perennial streams, and degrading water quality.

Below are pictures of a study from 2014 to measure the impact of wild and feral horse herds. Exclusion cages were put in place to prevent horses from grazing in small circles of grassland. The picture on the left is a wide shot of grasslands with the exclusion cage in place. The picture on the right is a close up of the circular plot of excluded grassland after the cage has been removed. The pictures illustrate the extent to which the horses overgraze by highlighting the comparison of what the grassland looked like prior to and after grazing by horse herds in the wilderness.



Exclusion Cage in place



Close up of plot excluded from grazing

IMPACTS ON CULTURE AND TRADITION

Mule deer, elk, big horn sheep and moose have all been displaced because of increasing shortage of grasslands. The Fish and Wildlife Service have observed less use by wintering groups of elk on crucial winter ranges in the northwest area of the reservation. When big game are not able to find grasslands on which to forage on the reservation, they will migrate to areas where they can find food. Many times, that means they migrate off the reservation or to higher elevations. This has been particularly taxing on tribal members who have traditionally depended on big game for subsistence. Each June, the Wind River Fish and Game sells permits to eligible tribal members participating in the Tribe's traditional Sundance ceremony. Historically, this has been a way to allow tribal members to carry on the tribal tradition of taking big game for various uses in the tribal ceremony. The Sundance hunting season eases the financial burden of tribal members as well as fosters the continuation of tribal traditions. However, with the growing impact of wild and feral horses, the game have been more and more difficult to locate and hunt because they have migrated off the reservation or in areas that are very difficult to access.

Additionally, tribal members have a traditional and/or ceremonial use for many plants and materials found on the reservation. As the horse herds grow and migrate to different parts of the reservation, they begin to threaten the plants and materials used traditionally and ceremonially. A long-term or permanent loss of these plants and materials would be culturally devastating.

UNKNOWN IMPACTS

The tribes and its partners are just beginning to discover the ways in which the wild and feral horse overpopulation is impacting our reservation. While we cannot know with specificity, we suspect the wild and feral horse population has the potential to permanently affect our culture, environment, ecology and economy.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

It will take a multi-partner approach to fully address the wild and feral horse problem on reservation lands across Indian country. It will take the cooperation and input of tribes, government agencies, and interest groups to assess current impacts and develop plans for removal and mitigation of future impacts. On the Wind River, horse removal is a priority. The Tribes, along with government agencies, have developed a methodology for removal of the wild and feral horse population. However, this is only one step to addressing the issue. We will require the knowledge of tribal members, wildlife and ecology experts, and federal agencies to help return our lands to their former state. And to protect the lands from future invasion of feral horses, the Wind River tribes will require more enforcement figures in our Fish and Game Department.

Thank you.