THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Cable News Network
190 Marietta Street Northwest
Atlanta, GA 30303

Via online comment submission to CNN.com and post

RE: *Battling over the wild horse roundup*, posted 3 January 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

The Wildlife Society appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the CNN news piece *Battling over the wild horse roundup* posted on CNN.com on 3 January 2011 (http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/us/2011/01/03/zarrella.wild.mustangs.cnn?iref=allsearch). The Wildlife Society (TWS) was founded in 1937 and is a non-profit scientific and educational association representing over 10,000 professional wildlife biologists and managers, dedicated to excellence in wildlife stewardship through science and education. The mission of TWS is to represent and serve the professional community of scientists, managers, educators, technicians, planners, and others who work actively to study, manage, and conserve wildlife and its habitats worldwide.

TWS would like to express concern regarding recent coverage of free-ranging (or feral) horse management as exhibited in the aforementioned news piece. We believe the piece lacks a balanced account of the issues at hand. The voice of interest groups expressing concern for affected horses is prominent throughout the piece and overwhelms that of Bureau of Land Management employees providing science-based rationale behind the use of roundups as part of a publicly-approved management plan. Your depiction of this situation was oversimplified as "the U.S. government chasing them [the horses] down with helicopters" versus "the animal rights groups who want it stopped." The issue, however, extends far beyond roundups.

Feral horses are an exotic species in North America. Exotic, or non-native, species are among the most widespread and serious threats to the integrity of native wildlife populations because of their potential to invade and degrade native ecosystems. Exotic plant and animal species present special challenges for wildlife managers because their impacts on the native biota are poorly understood by the general public, and many people regard them as a component of the natural ecosystem. As a result, some exotic species have advocacy groups that promote their continued presence in landscapes where they are not native, and few policies and laws deal directly with their control. Feral horses (*Equus caballus)* that roam freely across western North America are

examples of such species: they are iconic and much-loved by some, but damage wildlife habitat and require constant management through population reduction activities.

Although many now-extinct horse lineages evolved in North America, today's feral horses are not descendants of the North American equids of the Pleistocene, and these modern-day horses are not members of the same species as North American fossil specimens. Since native North American horses went extinct over 10,000 years ago, the western United States has become more arid and many of the original horses' natural predators, such as the American lion and saber-toothed cat, have also gone extinct, changing the ecosystem and the role horses play. Today, scientists consider horses to be a recent and disruptive addition to North American ecology, rather than a native species.

Herds of feral horses can cause significant damage to the environment. Currently, estimates suggest that these herds, along with burros *(E. asinus)*, range across more than 45 million acres in 10 states in the American west and 2 Canadian provinces. Large herbivores (both native and non-native) can disturb landscapes by trampling soils and vegetation, selectively grazing and overutilizing palatable plants, and altering the distribution of nutrients in the ecosystem. When horses are added to an ecosystem, little native habitat, from grassy plains to steeper rockier areas, is left undisturbed. Studies in the Great Basin have shown that areas inhabited by feral horses tend to have fewer plant species and less plant cover than areas without horses, as well as more invasive plant species such as cheatgrass, which itself is widely known as poor wildlife habitat. The small reptiles and mammals in the western North American ecoregion that depend on burrows and brush cover to survive and breed are less abundant in horse-occupied sites. These reptiles and mammals are an important component of the desert ecology because they provide a link between different parts of the food web and their populations are severely reduced or disappear, the larger ecosystem begins to unravel. Pronghorns (*Antilocapra americana*) and bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) avoid water sources when horses are present, further limiting their access to water in arid and semiarid environments.

A variety of management practices have been in use by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) since Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act in 1971. Existing management practices include periodic population counts and rapid assessments of ecosystem status in order to determine where overpopulation exists; roundups to capture and transport animals; use of contraception to manage population size; adoption of animals to private owners; and the humane destruction of old, ailing, or unadoptable animals. However, management involving euthanasia, and sometimes the roundups themselves, are severely restricted by popular opinion. While the public and interest groups express concern for affected horses and burros, they often fail to consider the conservation of other plants and animals in the ecosystem, as well as the likelihood horses and burros will die from starvation, thirst, and exposure when their numbers exceed the ability of the land to support them.

Due to public opinion, animals passed over for adoption are not euthanized; instead, they are placed into short- or long-term holding facilities. The number of animals adopted annually has declined in recent years, necessitating additional holding facilities. In turn, program costs are rising to unsustainable levels and diverting funding that could be used to manage and sustain habitats for native wildlife. Sound, scientifically-based horse management practices should be

employed to protect the highly sensitive arid and semiarid ecosystems of the West and keep taxpayer costs to an acceptable level.

Left unchecked by natural predators, populations of feral horses are soaring and impacting native species and their habitats. The conservation of plants and other animals in the ecosystem is a major concern, as is the fate of horses when their numbers exceed the ability of habitats to support them. Clearly, the present situation is unsustainable for both feral horses and native species, and roundups are just one means of addressing the issue. Your recent coverage either glosses over these critical parts of the story or leaves them out entirely.

The management of the West's feral horses is complicated, controversial, and necessitates consideration of the full spectrum of issues. For any solution to be viable, the input of an informed public is essential. CNN and other media sources play a key informative role for the public, but it is only through the provision of accurate and complete coverage of issues, such as feral horse management, that the public and, subsequently, wildlife are best served.

Please see the enclosed TWS feral horse factsheet and *The Wildlife Professional* Winter 2010 publication (with relevant articles marked), which further discuss the history, impacts, and management of feral horses in the western North America.

Sincerely,

Thomas J. Ryder, President