Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 10, 2026

The Honorable Orice W. Brown
Acting Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Acting Comptroller General Brown:

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Wild Horse and Burro Sale Program, including the agency's implementation of its statutory Sale Authority, use of "sales without limitation," internal controls governing sales, and oversight of horses and burros after title transfers from the federal government.

This request is particularly urgent in light of recent reporting by The New York Times detailing how changes in the BLM's management of wild horses and burros could exploit a legal loophole to facilitate their movement into the slaughter pipeline.[1] The reporting raises renewed concerns about whether BLM's Sale Program is being used to circumvent longstanding congressional protections intended to prevent federally protected wild horses and burros from being sold or otherwise funneled into slaughter.

Congress has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the humane management and protection of America's wild horses and burros through the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act and annual Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations measures.[2] For decades, Congress has included language prohibiting the use of appropriated funds to destroy healthy wild horses and burros or to sell them for processing into commercial products.[3] These longstanding protections reflect Congress's clear intent that federally protected wild horses and burros not enter the slaughter pipeline. Most recently, the bipartisan Van Drew-Titus amendment was included in the BUILD America 250 Act to prohibit the transportation of equines for slaughter, further demonstrating Congress's continued commitment to preventing horses from being funneled into the slaughter industry.[4]

Yet the legal framework governing BLM's Sale Authority contains a significant vulnerability. The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, as amended in 2005, provides authority for certain excess animals to be sold "without limitation."[5] GAO itself previously examined this authority and found that, after BLM began selling wild horses without limitation, 41 animals were discovered to have been slaughtered in 2005.[6] In response,

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[1] Dave Phillips, "Under Trump, Protected Wild Horses Are Going to Slaughter," The New York Times, August 20, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/20/us/trump-wild-horses-legal-loophole-slaughter.html.

[2] Amelia Perrin, "House Passes FY26 Appropriations with Wild Horse Funding and Protections," American Wild Horse Conservation, January 9, 2026, https://www.americanwildhorse.org/stories/house-passes-fy26-appropriations-with-wild-horse-funding-and-protections.

[3] Carol Hardy Vincent, "Wild Horse and Burro Management: Overview of Costs | Congress.Gov | Library of Congress," Congress.gov, January 15, 2026, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11060.

[4] "Animal Welfare Groups Celebrate Committee Passage of the Van Drew-Titus Amendment to Ban Horse Slaughter," ASPCA, May 22, 2026, https://www.aspca.org/about-us/press-releases/animal-welfare-groups-celebrate-committee-passage-van-drew-titus-amendment.

[5] Wild free-roaming horses and burros act, as amended, 2005, https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/programs_wildhorse_history_doc1.pdf.

BLM suspended its sales program and instituted controls intended to prevent animals from being resold to slaughter facilities. Nearly two decades later, questions remain about whether those safeguards are sufficient.

Beginning in 2018, BLM transmitted to Congress a report outlining four management strategies.[7] Congress subsequently provided substantial additional funding, resulting in a dramatic increase in gathers and removals. Annual removals climbed from several thousand animals earlier in the decade to more than 10,000 annually by 2018 and exceeded 20,000 animals in 2022.[8]

As removals have accelerated, BLM has increasingly relied on adoptions and sales to move animals out of costly off-range holding facilities. BLM has promoted its Sale Program as a means of placing horses and burros with private owners, while publicly reporting adoptions and sales together as successful placement outcomes. There is also an upward trend in sales, with 3,718 horses sold in 2025 compared to 286 just 10 years earlier in 2015.[9] Adoptions also nearly doubled within that same time frame.[10] This raises an important oversight question: How many animals are being sold, to whom, under what safeguards, and what happens to them after federal title is transferred?

The distinction between adoption and sale is critical. Under an adoption, BLM retains a continuing relationship with the adopter until title is transferred and can impose conditions governing the animal's care. Under a sale, particularly a sale that results in the transfer of title, federal oversight may be substantially diminished. If an animal can subsequently be resold and ultimately enter the slaughter pipeline, a sale may function as a de facto disposal mechanism even when BLM does not directly sell an animal to a slaughter facility.

The history of the program demonstrates why this risk warrants independent examination. In 2012, the Tom Davis scandal revealed serious weaknesses in BLM's oversight after approximately 1,700 wild horses were sold to a single buyer despite warning signs that many of the animals were destined for slaughter.[11] BLM subsequently adopted additional certifications and internal safeguards, but questions remain about the effectiveness of purchaser screening, monitoring, enforcement, repossession, and debarment.

Recent events further underscore the need for an independent review. Following reports that federally protected wild horses appeared at the New Holland auction in Pennsylvania, BLM intervened, voided the transaction, and reclaimed the horses for placement through proper BLM adoption contracts.[12] This action demonstrates that BLM can intervene when animals sold through its program are subsequently identified in circumstances inconsistent with the agency's stated protections. At the same time, other recently sold, branded BLM horses and burros have reportedly appeared at livestock auctions and in facilities associated with the slaughter pipeline without comparable intervention.

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[6] "Effective Long-Term Options Needed to Manage Unadoptable Wild Horses," Government Accountability Office, October 2008, https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-09-77.pdf.
[7] Cory Golden, "Setting the Record Straight on 'the Path Forward,'" Return to Freedom, August 21, 2024, https://returntofreedom.org/setting-the-record-straight-on-the-path-forward/.
[8] "Programs: Wild Horse and Burro: About the Program: Program Data," Bureau of Land Management, 2026, https://www.blm.gov/programs/wild-horse-and-burro/about-the-program/program-data.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Dave Philipps, "All the Missing Horses: What Happened to the Wild Horses Tom Davis Bought from the Gov't?," ProPublica, September 28, 2012, https://www.propublica.org/article/missing-what-happened-to-wild-horses-tom-davis-bought-from-the-govt.
[12] Dave Phillips, "Under Trump, Protected Wild Horses Are Going to Slaughter," The New York Times, August 20, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/20/us/trump-wild-horses-legal-loophole-slaughter.html.

The apparent inconsistency raises fundamental questions about BLM's internal controls and enforcement practices. If BLM has the authority and ability to reclaim animals in certain circumstances, Congress needs to understand what triggers intervention, how those cases are identified, why comparable cases may not receive the same treatment, and whether the agency's safeguards are being applied consistently.

These concerns are particularly significant given the scale of the current program. BLM's aggressive removal strategy has increased the number of animals requiring placement or long-term holding, while the agency has simultaneously expanded its reliance on sales. The 2018 BLM report to Congress itself contemplated "sales without limitation" as a means of addressing the population and holding challenge, estimating that approximately 110,000 wild horses and burros would need to be sold under one of the agency's proposed approaches.

Congress therefore needs an independent assessment of whether BLM's current Sale Program is operating as Congress intended, or whether it has created a mechanism through which animals can predictably enter the slaughter pipeline after federal title is transferred.

Accordingly, we respectfully request that GAO evaluate BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Sale Program and address the following questions:

Implementation of Sale Authority

- How has BLM implemented its Sale Authority, including "sales without limitation," since enactment of the 2004 amendments to the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act?
- How many horses and burros have been sold annually under Sale Authority since 2004, and what trends have emerged over time?
- How has BLM's reliance on sales changed following the substantial increase in congressional funding for removals in Fiscal Year 2018 and onwards?
- To what extent do current group and individual sales operate differently from the historical "sales without limitation" that Congress sought to restrict through appropriations language?

Purchaser Screening and Internal Controls

- What policies, procedures, and internal controls govern purchaser screening, approval, monitoring, and post-sale oversight?
- How does BLM identify and manage high-risk or repeat purchasers?
- Does BLM maintain records of individuals or entities that have purchased large numbers of horses or burros over time, including purchases made through related individuals or entities?
- What mechanisms exist to identify purchasers with connections to livestock auctions, kill buyers, brokers, slaughter facilities, or other high-risk entities?
- How frequently has BLM investigated allegations that sold animals entered slaughter channels, and what enforcement actions, including repossessions, purchaser suspensions, or debarments, have resulted?

Post-Sale Outcomes and Enforcement

- What information does BLM collect regarding the disposition of horses and burros after title transfers?
- To what extent can BLM determine whether sold animals ultimately enter commercial slaughter channels?
- Under what circumstances does BLM have authority to repossess or otherwise recover an animal after a sale?
- What criteria does BLM use to determine whether to intervene when a sold horse or burro is subsequently identified at an auction, kill pen, or other slaughter-related facility?
- How many horses and burros has BLM repossessed following a sale during the past ten years, and what circumstances led to those actions?
- How many purchasers have been suspended, debarred, or otherwise restricted during the same period?
- Does BLM distinguish between adoption and sale outcomes when reporting placement success to Congress and the public?

Compliance with Congressional Direction

- Is BLM administering the Sale Program in a manner consistent with annual appropriations language prohibiting the destruction of healthy wild horses and burros or their sale for processing into commercial products?
- Are BLM's current sales practices consistent with the purpose and intent of congressional restrictions on "sales without limitation"?
- Does BLM have adequate safeguards to prevent sales that it knows, or reasonably should know, are likely to result in animals entering the slaughter pipeline?
- To what extent could current Sale Authority practices undermine congressional prohibitions by transferring animals to purchasers who subsequently resell them for slaughter?
- Are current policies and oversight mechanisms sufficient to ensure that federally protected animals are not predictably diverted into slaughter?

Program Management and Congressional Oversight

- What relationship exists between BLM's removal targets, off-range holding population, adoption rates, and reliance on sales?
- Has BLM evaluated whether its current removal and sale strategies create incentives to prioritize rapid disposal over durable placement outcomes?
- What statutory, regulatory, administrative, or reporting changes would strengthen congressional oversight and accountability?

A comprehensive GAO review would provide Congress with an independent assessment of whether BLM's current practices adequately protect federally managed wild horses and burros, comply with congressional directives, and appropriately safeguard taxpayer resources. It would also build upon GAO's prior examination of BLM's wild horse management and sales practices, allowing Congress to determine whether safeguards remain effective nearly two decades later.

Most importantly, this review would help Congress determine whether the Sale Program is functioning as a legitimate placement mechanism or has become a pathway through which federally protected wild horses and burros can predictably enter the slaughter pipeline after title transfers. The recent reporting in The New York Times, together with BLM's expanded reliance on removals and sales, makes an independent examination especially timely.

GAO's findings would provide Congress with the factual basis necessary to strengthen safeguards, improve reporting requirements, ensure compliance with appropriations restrictions and the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, and consider additional statutory changes where necessary.

Thank you for your attention to this request. We appreciate GAO's continued assistance in helping Congress conduct effective oversight of federal programs and ensure that federal agencies faithfully implement congressional intent.

Sincerely,

Dina Titus
Member of Congress

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Angela D. Alsobrooks
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
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