

Wild Horses & Washington D.C:

A Legislative Update on the Wild Horse Issue in Congress

by: Jill Anderson, Return to Freedom (American Wild Horse Sanctuary)

It's been just over a year since Senator Conrad Burns (R-MT) attached his infamous rider to a Federal Appropriations bill, gutting the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act. Last fall, on the eve of Thanksgiving weekend while Americans prepared to celebrate the cultural tradition of giving thanks for our blessings, Senator Burns was slipping a few lines into a 3300 page budget bill. These lines, unread and unnoticed by most Members of Congress, condemned America's wild horses – our living cultural history - by making it legal and profitable to sell wild horses to slaughter.



CAYUSE herd. These horses live at Return to Freedom, where horses live in family bands and herds as they would in the wild. During round ups, herds are broken up and scattered . . . often separating mothers and foals.

In response to this underhanded and irresponsible attack on our wild horses, equine advocates, lawmakers, and the American public launched a massive grassroots effort to overturn this new policy. Return to Freedom and the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign joined forces with other organizations in a national planning group that lead the charge to combat the Burns rider.

Alongside allies like The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), The Society for Animal Protective Legislation (SAPL), the American Horse Defense Fund (AHDF), and many others, we lobbied in Washington DC, held press conferences, sent out action alerts and organized letter writing campaigns. Hollywood celebrities even joined the effort. Robert Redford addressed a letter to each member of the House of Representatives when a critical amendment was on the House floor. Viggo Mortensen taped a PSA condemning the Burns legislation and calling for the protection of America's wild horses. You can read the letter and view the PSA on our website at www.returntofreedom.org. Others like Noah Wyle, Richard Gere, Sir Paul McCartney, Willie Nelson, Clint Eastwood, Nicollette Sheridan, and many more issued quotes or signed letters to Congress. It was indeed a powerful coalition and we fought hard.



Wild horses in holding pen after roundup. With the Burns rider mandating all "excess" wild horses be rounded up and sold to the highest bidder, many of the older members of a herd could end up at slaughter.

Our efforts paid off and we won passage of an amendment that will prevent the slaughter of all horses –wild or domestic – for one fiscal year. The amendment, introduced in the House by Reps Sweeney, Spratt, Rahall and Whitfield and in the Senate by Senators Ensign and Byrd, won by landslide votes in both the House and the Senate. This was a clear indication that our voices were being heard loud and clear on Capitol Hill.

Despite this overwhelming support to end horse slaughter, Henry Bonilla, Chairman of the Conference Committee for this bill, vowed to strip the amendment from the final version of the bill. But our champions in Congress held their ground and the amendment remained in. This is a victory we can all be proud of.

Attached to the Agriculture Appropriations bill, the amendment prohibits the use of Federal dollars to fund USDA inspectors at horse slaughter facilities. Without USDA inspection, slaughter facilities cannot legally export their horsemeat. This, we are hoping, will force the horse slaughter industry to close its doors permanently in the US.

Opponents of the amendment did succeed in delaying its implementation for 3 months, giving it an effective date of March 2006. By that time, some 25,000 horses will be slaughtered. When Congress comes back into session in January, we must push even harder for passage of full legislation that will permanently shut down the brutal horse slaughter industry in this country.

HR 297 and S 576 would permanently restore the ban on wild horse slaughter, and HR 503 and S 1915 would prohibit the slaughter of any horses – wild or domestic. These bills, despite massive public support, were not released from Committee for a vote in 2005. The recent victory with the anti-horse slaughter amendment proves that if given the opportunity to vote, Congress would pass this legislation and horses would no longer spend their final days in a feedlot, awaiting a terrifying and gruesome death.

Please continue to write to and call your representatives in Congress, asking for their support of this legislation. [Secretary Mike Johanns PH: 202-720-3631/ Fax: 202 720-2166 / Email: mike.johanns@usda.gov] To learn more, and to get the latest updates, please visit www.wildhorsepreservation.com.

