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House Moves to Block Sales of Wild Horses

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WASHINGTON -- Lawmakers voted Thursday to block a six-month-old law that allows the government to sell wild horses and burros, with opponents of the law protesting that the animals were ending up in processing plants and on the tables of foreign restaurants.

The 249-159 House vote would stop the Bureau of Land Management from using any money in a \$26.2 billion bill funding next year's natural resources and arts programs to sell horses that roam public lands in Western states.

The measure overturns a provision in a spending bill passed last December that ended a 33-year-old policy of protecting wild horses from sale or processing. The horses, said Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., shouldn't be sold so they "can end up on the menus of France, Belgium and Japan."

Other programs in the bill, which funds the Interior Department and Environmental Protection Agency, absorbed a 3 percent spending cut from \$27 billion this year. Lawmakers shrank grants for local water projects while boosting money for National Park Service operations. It passed 329-89.

The House action on horses came as the Bureau of Land Management announced Thursday that it was resuming the sale of wild horses and burros but with tougher restrictions against sales for slaughter. The agency last month temporarily halted sales after 41 horses were killed.

The agency's revised contract requires that buyers agree they will not knowingly purchase horses intending to resell, trade or give the animals to a slaughterhouse.

Since lawmakers enacted the horse sales law in December, BLM sold and delivered 1,000 horses. Another 1,000 have been sold but remain undelivered, and those agreements will be reviewed.

"Our agency is committed to the well-being of wild horses and burros, both on and off the range," said BLM Director Kathleen Clarke.

The law let the agency sell wild horses and burros that are more than 10 years old, or younger if they've been passed over for adoption three times.

BLM says 37,000 wild horses and burros forage its lands, 9,000 more than Western ranges can sustain. The agency has removed about 10,000 each year to manage the population.

Between 6,000 and 7,000 get adopted every year, and the agency currently cares for about 22,500 in holding facilities in the West and Midwest.

A procedural tactic was used to reject a proposed amendment by Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Ohio, to bar the use of taxpayer money to build new timber roads in Alaska's Tongass National Forest, the nation's largest forest.

A similar tactic was employed to block an amendment that would have set conditions for ending the moratorium on oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. Another proposal to end the moratorium on natural gas development in the Outer Continental Shelf was defeated 262-157.

A decision to cut programs that grant money to states, which then lend the funds to local governments for water treatment and sewage programs, came under criticism from many Democrats. The grants sustained a \$241 million, or 22 percent, reduction.

In a statement, the White House urged Congress to support more of the president's priorities and cut some of the \$280 million set aside for projects in lawmakers' districts. The president wanted to see more money devoted to land acquisition, water supply security, greenhouse gas reduction and local cultural and historic preservation.

The National Park Service would get more money for its day-to-day operations and for attacking a backlog of maintenance projects. Overall, lawmakers cut the park service budget by \$137 million with the elimination of a \$90 million grant program for state parks and a pause in government land acquisitions.

The bill, which hasn't yet been considered in the Senate, would also:

_ Fund national firefighting plans at \$2.7 billion, including increases for wildfire suppression and preparedness.

_ Provide \$131 million to the National Endowment for the Arts and \$143 million for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

_ Increase spending on Indian health and education programs.

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The bill is H.R. 2361.

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