

AMERICAN MUSTANG

3D Film Brings Wild
Horse Issue Into Focus

By Geoff Young

Photography by Tara Arrowood



AMERICAN MUSTANG



THE STORY OF A GIRL, A COWBOY AND A WILD HORSE

SWIFT RASCAL PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS A JUST MEDIA PICTURE "AMERICAN MUSTANG 3D"
NARRATED BY DARYL HANNAH AND INTRODUCING JULIA PUTNAM & LUKE NEUBERT & JIM NEUBERT SPECIAL APPEARANCE BY ALISON EASTWOOD
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY PABLO BERRON EDITED BY DAVID DODSON & DAVID M. BLUM MUSIC BY RON FISH WRITTEN BY HENRY ANSBACHER & ELLIE PHIPPS PRICE
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ELLIE PHIPPS PRICE PRODUCED BY HENRY ANSBACHER DIRECTED BY MONTY MIRANDA

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I HAVE BEEN PASSIONATE ABOUT THE SURVIVAL OF OUR WILD HORSES in the American West, publishing articles about the cruel and senseless management practices of the herds since 2006. It has been a sad and depressing campaign following the plight of these icons of our Western heritage. And to be honest, I felt a sense of hopelessness this year when the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) released its long-awaited report on the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) wild horse management program.

The NAS report eviscerated the failed management practices of the BLM stating that, "The Wild Horse and Burro Program has not used scientifically rigorous methods to estimate the population sizes of horses and burros, to model the effects of management actions on the animals, or to assess the availability and use of forage on range lands."

It shouldn't take the nation's leading scientists to point out that rounding up tens of thousands of wild horses with helicopters from our public lands and stockpiling them in holding facilities, at an enormous cost to the American taxpayer, and great benefit to the ranching and livestock industry, is a really bad plan.

And what has me feeling hopeless and depressed is that the Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell, has pretty much blown off the report—barely commenting on it or taking action regarding the recommendations laid out. And the real kicker is that Jewell has a science background with a degree in mechanical engineering and yet ignores the science behind the NAS report.

Ellie Phipps Price, Producer of AMERICAN MUSTANG, and partner Chris Towt with Dunstan, a mustang who is the namesake of the couple's winery at the Durrell Vineyard in Sonoma, CA.



It's clear where government stands: the BLM is working for ranching interests at the expense of wild horses and the public at large.

It doesn't look good. Wild horses continue to be cruelly rounded up, with more wild horses now in holding than running free on the range. The ranching industry, one of the many loan sharks that own our congressmen, have seen to it that more and more of our public land is taken from our wild horses and given to private livestock concerns as one big welfare giveaway that we are paying for.

It's frustrating after all of these years to see little to no change while outraged people vent about saving our wild horses on social media and sign one of hundreds of petitions that, like the wild horses that are rounded up, go somewhere but nobody knows where.

But something has happened that gives me hope that may get our voices united again with passion and fervor, and bring the message of our wild horses to people who have been unaware or unconcerned about their future. Let's start this fight all over again—by watching a movie.

AMERICAN MUSTANG

I attended the world premiere of AMERICAN MUSTANG on Nov. 11 at the Starz Denver Film Festival, and though this is not the first film about the wild horses, it may turn out to be the most accessible because it tackles the subject unlike any film previously.

The 70-minute movie, shot in 3-D and narrated by award-winning actress Daryl Hannah, is a character-driven narrative wrapped artfully around a documentary about the plight of our wild horses.

AMERICAN MUSTANG is crafted to be a film that the entire family will enjoy, a smart move since the subject material can be brutal and shocking to watch. There is footage of the roundups and the holding areas, but it is done from a distance and angle that lessens the blow of what we know is going on. Add to that the incredible 3-D footage of the mustangs running free on their native lands, and you have a movie that has the potential to draw millions of Americans into the debate to save our wild horses.

AMERICAN MUSTANG, directed by Monty Miranda, was written and produced by Ellie Phipps Price and Henry Ansbacher of Just Media, a Denver-based film company that produces documentaries to raise awareness of social justice and environmental issues.

Colorado native Phipps Price has been a long time wild horse advocate who walks the talk—she has 220 adopted mustangs on a 2,000-acre wildlife preserve in Northern California.

I sat down with Ellie after the movie premiere to get her thoughts on the journey to create AMERICAN MUSTANG, and where it goes from here.

HC What influenced you to start this quest to save the wild horses and to make this movie about them?

EPP I've always thought of wild mustangs as something from long ago. I had never seen wild horses on the range, but I was moved when I read the book *Mustang*:



Ellie and Dunstan, who was adopted from the Cañon City, Colorado BLM Wild Horse Inmate Program in 2009.

The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West by Deanne Stillman. It tells the history of America through the lens of the mustang. As Deanne points out, this is the horse we rode in on. America was built on the backs of these horses.

I started seeing articles about government mistreatment and mismanagement of wild horses on the range, and it struck me as wrong that a government agency that historically has been, and remains, at the service of the ranching industry, would be charged with managing wild horses. It's like the fox guarding the henhouse.

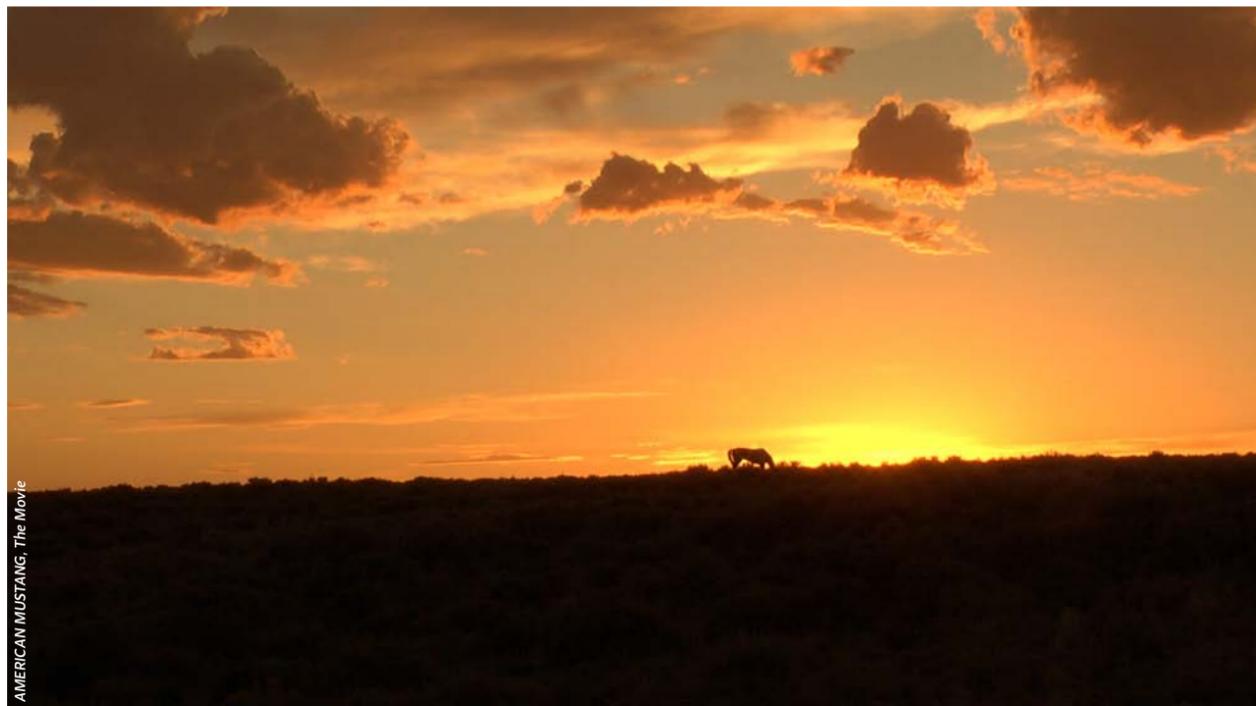
HC I thought we had a law in place to protect the wild horses.

EPP We do but, for over 40 years, the BLM has subverted the intent of the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. Instead of protecting them as "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West" that "enrich the lives of the American people," the BLM has driven the mustangs by the tens of thousands from our public lands. At its core, this is a land battle between the ranching interests and the larger public, which is concerned with preserving wild horses and protecting our public lands. It's clear where government stands: the BLM is working for ranching interests at the expense of wild horses and the public at large.

HC It all boils down to money. Ranchers have big financial leverage with congress and they are organized against the interests of the wild horse activists.

EPP Yes, the ranching community acts in solidarity against wild horses. It's puzzling that ranchers who have to pay market rates for grazing would side with public lands ranchers who receive tax subsidies. It's very puzzling to me.

HC That's a very interesting point. Ranchers tend to be conservative politically, so it is completely backward that they



This beautiful image from the movie comes with the saddest of stories. The horse pictured was an old, slow moving mustang that had lived his whole life in the wild on the Wyoming range. On the day after this shot was taken, he was rounded up, driven by helicopters over 20 miles into a BLM trap. By the time he got there he was lame, traumatized, and exhausted. The BLM put him down at the trap site.



Just days before these wild horses were rounded up and removed from the Wyoming range, AMERICAN MUSTANG, the movie, documented the horses with their family bands. The White Mountain Herd, Rock Springs Wyoming, July 2010

would support those in their industry that benefit from grazing land subsidies, getting big government handouts, and a free ride from the taxpayers. That goes against the crux of conservative talking points. The program is also far from being fiscally conservative, isn't it?

EPP Tax subsidized grazing on public lands costs taxpayers as much as half a billion dollars a year. The wild horse program alone costs nearly \$80 million annually, and 70% of that budget is spent to round up and stockpile horses in holding facilities. Only 4% of the budget is used on fertility control and range management—that is just upside down.

HC You back up your passion with action regarding the wild horses. You have produced this movie and have personally adopted wild mustangs and created a sanctuary. What else are you doing?

EPP The movie is one part of raising awareness, but I've also put a lot of energy into supporting the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign, which is a coalition of over 50 organizations and individuals. The goal is to provide a unified platform and voice

for the wild horses backed by a strong grassroots base. The campaign has environmentalists and horse advocates working together on common ground toward common goals.

HC Is the BLM's management program for the wild horses destined to fail?

EPP One concern I have here is that the government has, over protests by citi-

Only 4% of the [wild horse program] budget is used on fertility control and range management—that is just upside down.

zens, in both Democratic and Republican administrations, continued to round up these horses and stockpile them in holding, creating a completely unsustainable and ridiculous model that is going to be extremely expensive to support. And now that we're in this mess, I'm concerned that the BLM is just going to throw up its hands and say, let's send these horses to slaughter. The American people have very firmly said two things—wild horses should be protected and horses should not be slaughtered. I don't think the American people

will stand by and allow the government to sell America's wild horses for slaughter.

HC The NAS report offered some science-based solutions to managing the populations of the wild horses using birth control and resource allocation. Do you think the BLM will adopt these recommendations?

EPP The BLM is not going to reform itself. It's going to take the Administration and Congress to step in and force the agency to change. Adopting a science-based approach to wild horse management is going to require a cultural shift within the agency. The BLM must start managing wild horses as wildlife, not livestock.

HC Getting this information to a large number of people is important in changing attitudes about how we care for and manage the wild horses and one of the most effective ways to do this is with an engaging movie. You've done just that with AMERICAN MUSTANG. What I find interesting is that instead of a traditional documentary film, you've incorporated a narrative and a story that envelops the factual



They exhibit steadfastness, loyalty to family and the ability to survive. They are, frankly, an inspiration. We connect to them. They represent the best of American qualities. This country was built on their backs.



This scene from the movie shows a mustang being saddled for the first time by Luke Neubert. "Watch your cameras, boys."



The number of wild horses the BLM allows on the range is completely arbitrary. It's not based on any science, and they've acknowledged that the numbers are basically just pulled out of the air.

aspects of this situation. How did this come about and why did you think this was the best way to get your message out about the plight of the wild horses?

EPP We needed to show what's happening in a new way. People have become tired of the very sad story of what's been done to the wild horses. Watching a roundup is depressing, horses are hurt and family bands are torn apart. It's a sad tragic story. Seeing a roundup in person is heartbreaking. If you get a chance to see these horses in the wild, you are struck by their incredible beauty and their amazing ability to survive. They are steadfast, loyal, and strong. Watching the helicopters come in and tear their families apart is devastating. We decided to include some roundup footage, because we didn't want that part of the story to be ignored, but we also built in a more personal story, that of a 14-year-old girl. We think a lot of young girls who love horses will relate to this story. It makes the movie more interesting and appealing to a broader audience.

HC Your decision to shoot the movie in 3-D takes the scenes of the wild horses to a level never seen outside of their natural habitat. Was this the impact you intended?

EPP Yes. We wanted to capture the incredible experience of seeing wild horses in the wild, on their own turf and their own terms. That's the allure of wild horses. The goal is not to catch them and ride them, but to glimpse them and know that they are out there.

It's a value for something that you can't touch.

HC What is the value to us in having wild horses?

EPP Why should people care about them? We live in a world where so much that is wild has been lost. It's important to know that there is still a place where wild horses run free. And the image of the mustang untamed and free on the western range strikes a deep chord with people, not just here but all over the world. That is meaningful.

Wildlife biologists I have spoken to tell me that the most interesting animal to study is the wild horse, because they live in complex societies with tightly knit family groups. They exhibit steadfastness, loyalty to family and the ability to survive. They are, frankly, an inspiration. We connect to them. To a lot of people they are like the bald eagle—symbols of freedom and strength. They represent the best of American qualities. This country was built on their backs. We owe them more than to hunt them down with helicopters. Wild horses are protected by law, yet we have a taxpayer-funded, cruel government program that treats these national icons like vermin.

HC And the situation is getting worse for the horses, isn't it?

EPP Yes, today wild horses are restricted to just 11% of BLM lands. Yet even on that small amount



Stallions fight after being forced into cramped quarters at a BLM trap. Many wild horses are seriously injured in the government roundups and during the processing that begins as soon as they are removed from the range.



A foal born to the matriarch of the Deer Run Herd, a small herd from Nevada that was rescued by advocates after a BLM roundup.



A filly born on the range, rounded up and branded by the BLM, ready for adoption from a private sanctuary.

of land, the vast majority of forage is allocated to livestock. Wild horses get 17% of the forage on just 11% of the land. And, each year, the BLM takes more and more land away from the horses. It's out of balance and the government is making it harder and harder for wild horses to survive.

HC It looks more like an eradication program than a management program. What do you think the goal of the BLM is with this?

EPP I think the BLM is trying to establish the most minimal representation of wild horses on the range that they can. There are tools like birth control available that the BLM can use instead of roundups and incarceration. Those were laid out very clearly in the NAS report.

HC Are sanctuaries a solution to managing wild horses?

EPP Sanctuaries are not the solution. They're not self-sustaining, and they're not model for management of wild horses on public lands. I created a sanctuary for the wild horses I rescued from slaughter. But it's a rescue. They are not real herds

because I don't have stallions. Once you take the horses off their land, you have to buy hay, vaccinate them, worm them and keep their hooves trimmed because there just isn't enough land for them to run on and naturally keep their hooves worn down. We show in the movie what's involved in trimming wild horses' hooves. It is traumatic, expensive and dangerous."

HC AMERICAN MUSTANG is a story that is told in four voices—that of a rancher, a cowboy, a young girl and the advocate. Which voice is yours?

EPP There is a lot of me in the voice of the advocate, but that voice was based on interviews with real people. These include advocates like Neda DeMayo of Return to Freedom; Ginger Kathrens of The Cloud Foundation; and Suzanne Roy of the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign. We also interviewed scientists and academics including Anne Perkins, a wildlife biologist and professor at Carrol College in Montana, Allen Rutberg, wildlife biologist at Tufts University Veterinary School; and Ed

deSteigeur, a professor of public land policy at the University of Arizona.

HC I found the rancher's voice to be authentic and a little humorous.

EPP Thank you. The rancher's voice was taken from actual conversations over the years. I grew up on a ranch and I didn't want to demonize ranchers. I wanted the rancher to be an educated person who cares about the land and the business of raising cattle. In the movie, there's a line that says ranchers are virtually the only ones who still use horses to do their work. They need horses to get the job done, but they don't have much use for wild horses. As far as humorous, you're probably referring to the rancher describing wild horse activists as "a bunch of menopausal do-gooder hippies." That gets a laugh.

HC To me, the striking part of the movie is when the young girl has an epiphany—she no longer wants to own and ride the wild mustang but wants to see it run free.

EPP We were really torn about how to cover adoption in the movie. I've adopted mustangs myself from the BLM, and they

are great horses. But, like sanctuaries, adoption doesn't provide a solution for the 50,000 wild horses standing around in government holding. The BLM can't adopt its way out of this problem and private individuals can't create sanctuaries for all of these horses.

We also wanted the story to be about how the young girl learns that there is value in having wild horses just be wild. That there's more value in freedom than in owning and riding a mustang. In the movie, the girl comes to a higher understanding about what wild horses are.

HC The money alone should be cause for concern about continuing this program. We, the American taxpayers, are paying over \$124,000 per day to keep almost 50,000 wild horses imprisoned. It is insanity, pure and simple.

EPP I agree. The current management doesn't make sense. We need to stop rounding up wild horses and start managing them on the range. We also need to allow higher wild horse populations where the land will sustain them.

The number of wild horses the BLM allows on the range is completely arbitrary. It's not based on any science, and they've acknowledged that the numbers are basically just pulled out of the air.

It's especially disconcerting when they blame wild horses for damaging the range, when there are at least 50 times more privately-owned livestock than wild horses on public land. It would be less expensive to buy out the grazing rights of the ranchers in Herd Management Areas than to round up more horses and put them in holding.

HC What do you hope people take away from AMERICAN MUSTANG?

EPP I hope that people who never knew about wild horses will be inspired to learn more about the issue and take a stand. I also hope that young people will learn what it takes to be an advocate for something, how to find your voice and make a difference. Some things are worth fighting for. Humane management of one of our national treasures is worth fighting for.



The battle is far from over. It's going to take sustained public pressure to get the BLM to embrace the recommendations of the NAS study and to implement a humane management system. Wild horses deserve a fairer share of resources on the small amount of public land designated as their habitat. The future of wild horses is in jeopardy. But, this isn't just about saving wild horses; it's about taking care of our history and our story going forward. It's about saving a piece of the West that's still wild.

The words from Thoreau's essay, "Walking," resonate today.

"The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him."

If the wild horses no longer run free, neither will we.

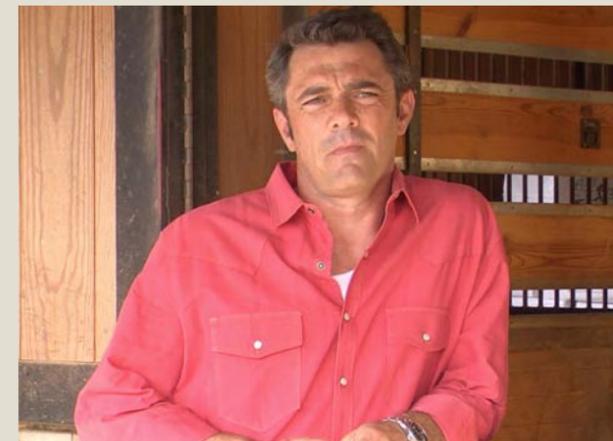


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Get involved:
StopTheRoundups.com
TheCloudFoundation.org
ReturnToFreedom.org

Read the NAS study: www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13511

Tell Secretary Jewell to adopt the recommendations in the NAS report. Email her here: feedback@ios.doi.gov



Henry Ansbacher, Producer & Co-Writer of AMERICAN MUSTANG

As executive director and founder of Just Media, Henry Ansbacher works to develop and produce documentary films to raise awareness of current social and environmental issues. His projects have earned multiple Emmys, screened at film festivals in the U.S. and Europe, and have been recipients of Best Documentary prizes and accolades.

Working on AMERICAN MUSTANG, Ansbacher was brought face to face with the dilemma of wild horse management.

Said Ansbacher, "What I didn't realize when I started working on this picture was what a contentious issue the management and the place of wild horses is in our country today. One hope that I have for the film is that it will allow people to see a little more, understand a little more about the complexity of the issue and might develop an emotional connection with the horses, that through this visceral experience of watching the film, they might shift a little bit in their view."

One way to impact the audience that sees AMERICAN MUSTANG is to give them an experience that will leave a lasting impression. Ansbacher believes that has been accomplished with this movie. "Film is a very powerful medium and there's really no substitute for that experience when you're in the theatre, the lights go down and the curtains open and the film starts, and you're just taken to another place. This film really does take you on a journey. We shot in 3-D in seven western states and we spent days on the range tracking wild horses. We shot in some of the most beautiful places in this country. At that moment when this great herd of mustangs comes cresting over the hill, and it's magic hour and it's in slow motion, it takes you to another place. When we got to that particular shot I just knew how incredible it was... it's in the movie and it really moved me—it really moved my soul to actually watch that happen."