



Bushwalking NSW Inc

Policy on Feral Horses in Natural Areas

Adopted July 15, 2003

1. Introduction

Horses are an introduced animal that have become a problem in natural areas. They are not a natural part of Australia's ecosystems.

The position of the Bushwalking NSW is that *horses do not belong in natural areas*.

Bushwalking NSW has a constitutional requirement for the preservation of and wise management of conservation reserves and the protection of the fauna, flora and natural systems within them. In addition it has a policy position against horse riding in Natural Areas. (see "Policy on the Use of Natural Areas")

With Australian numbers in excess of 30 000 (Dobbie, Berman and Braysher 1993) feral horses are doing extensive damage to the Australian environment. The reduction of the feral horse population in NSW Natural Areas to low numbers is quite achievable when compared with other pest species.

Feral horses create environmental damage for a number of reasons:

- They are heavy hard hoofed animals. The ground pressure loading of a horse's hoof is far in excess of native fauna and its structure acts as a powerful erosive agent. Their impact is dependent on the terrain and the climatic conditions of the areas that they traverse. For example, on snow feral horse tracks remove the protection from freezing weather that snow provides for small native species.:
- Their tracks
 - ❖ act as erosion gutters and lead to the silting of lower marshes, bogs, dams and reservoirs. These riparian areas are important to native species as they act as habitat and act as a buffer against the worst effects of seasonal dries and droughts;
 - ❖ When passing through bogs and marshes can lead to the drainage of these wetlands. Wetlands are of immense environmental value because they act to control floods, they replenish groundwater, they

retain sediment and nutrient, they mitigate against climate change, they purify water and they harbour a vast biodiversity (40% of world's species and 12% of all animal species)ⁱ

- Feral horses selectively graze herbs and forbs resulting in the breakdown of natural systems with a subsequent increase in soil erosion.
- Feral horses trample stream banks and create quagmires thus polluting waterways and damaging wetland fauna and flora.
- The deposition of large amounts of dung in specific areas changes the nutrient levels and insect population of any delicately balanced ecosystem.
- Feral horses spread foreign plant species to new areas.
- Newly released or escaped horses fed on grain can introduce unwanted plant species into the natural area which is also an argument for denying horse-riding in natural areas.

Duty-of-care considerations:

- The presence of horses on roadways is a danger to motorists.
- They provide a potential uncontrolled host for introduced livestock diseases that can be transferred to domestic animals.
- Feral horses have threatened Bushwalkers.

Cultural heritage site considerations:

- Horses damage unfenced cultural heritage sites, both European and Indigenous

2. Objective.

The objective of this Feral Horse Policy is to define Bushwalking NSW's position on the removal of all feral horses from all the State's natural areas. The means and conduct of the removal is outlined in the Implementation Section of this document. The intent of this feral horse removal prescription is to eliminate additional follow-on impacts.

3. Definitions.

For the purpose of this policy the following definitions are provided:

- 3.1 *Culling*: the eradication of the horses by any one of a variety of means.
- 3.2 *Feral*: Any animal that has reverted to the wild from domesticated or rural stock including the progeny of the original feral animals.

- 3.3 *Humane Control*: Any control methodology that does not needlessly stress the feral horse and its herd (mob). For instance, if the method of removal requires the killing of an animal then the killing process must be swift. Obviously this would rule out the use of means such as a bow and arrow or driving the feral horses over precipices.
- 3.4 *Natural Areas*: includes the natural parts of the National Parks and Wildlife Service Estate, Wilderness Areas, State Forests, Council lands, Department of Land and Water Conservation reserves dedicated to the preservation of flora and fauna,
- 3.5 *NPWS*: The acronym for the National Parks and Wildlife Service.
- 3.6 *Removal*: the extraction of the animal from an area using any humane methods of control.
- 3.6 *Wetlands*: are areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. They occur where the water table is at or near the surface of the land, or where the land is covered by shallow water. The Ramsar Convention articles state that Wetlands are: "areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres"...and ..."may incorporate riparian and coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands, and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than six metres at low tide lying within the wetlands".

4. Implementation

- 4.1 A publicly accessible Feral Horse Management Plan must be prepared prior to any control program implementation.
- 4.2 The Feral Horse Management Plan must contain provisions to minimise follow-on impacts such as population increases of predation species during and after a cull.
- 4.3 The formulation of a Feral Horse Management Plan must not be delayed for research monitoring purposes. (See Section 5)
- 4.4 Risk management procedures must be in place to protect the general public, land management staff and contractors from harm before any cull can begin.
- 4.5 The long term environmental impact from the process of horse removal should not be greater than the long-term impact of the horses not being removed. Consideration of the timing of removal may be important in some areas such as above the snowline where the snow cover can facilitate carcass removal by wide-track over-snow vehicles.

- 4.6 The removal of horses is not to be used as an opportunity or excuse for recreational horse-riding in excluded natural areas such as National Parks or Wilderness Areas. The agreement of a feral horse removal contract must be publicly available and specifically state the terms, conditions and expectations of the parties involved. All conditions in the contracts must be clearly identified, closely monitored, and enforced using penalties that are appropriate to achieving compliance with the contract.
- 4.7 Bushwalking NSW endorses the removal of feral horses by any humane and efficient means including the use of aerial and ground shooting.
- 4.8 In respect of the *Game and Feral Animal Control Bill (2002)*, Bushwalking NSW does not endorse the culling of feral horses in nature areas by privateers or sport shooters.
- 4.9 Feral horse removal is to be made on a no-selection basis i.e. feral horses are not to be removed on the basis of their resale value nor should the removal rate or timing be controlled to optimise horse market sale prices.
- 4.10 Public land managers must report the status of their feral horse populations in a publicly accessible feral animal report included in their annual reports. These reports must be placed on the Community Access to Natural Resources Information (CANRI) website network.
- 4.11 Horses should not be agisted in natural areas.
- 4.12 The management and domestication of captured feral horses destined for horse markets should not incur public expense.
- 4.13 The immediate response by the natural area land managers after a bushfire has affected a natural area should be to eradicate the surviving feral horse populations. This is to prevent further damage to the delicate soil structures and soil biota that have been disturbed by the fire event.

5. Research Benchmarking

Bushwalking NSW believes that a Feral Horse Management Plan is required for any feral horse-impacted natural area of the state. This Plan should be comprised of:

- A continual performance monitoring process for all control methodologies that are being applied during the culling program.
- A longitudinal monitoring program of the disturbed habitat. This is required to determine the regenerative ability of the native flora and fauna to provide a basis for determining damage assessment in similar areas.
- A determination of control methodology effectiveness in correlation to the terrain.

- A determination of control methodology effectiveness in correlation to the meteorological conditions i.e. snow, drought, flood etc.

The data obtained from this research can be used in the formulation of future Feral Horse Management Plans in other parts of the state.

Bushwalking NSW does not believe that the importance of research overrides the importance of eliminating the feral horse problem in an area. It does not support research that attempts to monitor feral horse population increases. It will only support research on decreasing feral horse populations throughout Australia.

6. References

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Draft Guidelines on Policies, Federation of Bushwalking Clubs NSW, January 1979

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