



Chasing Horses Wild Horse Advocates
P.O. Box 3562
Dickinson, ND 58602

How much are the Theodore Roosevelt National Park wild horses worth to the local economy of Medora North Dakota?

Theodore Roosevelt National Park had approximately 900,000 visitors to the park in 2023. Please note, this number is expected to increase significantly every year, especially in 2026 with the opening of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library.

The wild horses are always within the top 3 reasons why people visit the park. That means an average of 300,000 people come to Medora every year just to see the wild horses.

The average visitor spends \$50 for day trippers; \$200 a day for overnighers: making the average \$125/per day/per person

$\$125/\text{day} \times 300,000 \text{ visitors} = \$37,500,000 \text{ per year}$

$\$37,500,000 \text{ divided by an average of } 200 \text{ wild horses in the park} = \$187,500 \text{ per horse, per year}$

Take that number times the average life expectancy of around 18-20 years and that brings it to \$3,375,000 – \$3,750,000 per horse in their lifetime! They are a true natural treasure to the state of North Dakota in every sense.

**These numbers do not include visitors that drive across the state of North Dakota on their way to see the horses. Those visitors only increase the amount of money that the horses bring to the total economy in the state of North Dakota.

Erik Molvar
Post Office Box 1802
Santa Ynez, CA 93460
February 5, 2025

Testimony on North Dakota Senate Bill 2331

Dear Legislators:

The following is the testimony of Erik Molvar on Senate Bill 2331, relating to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park working group regarding wild horses.

I am a wildlife biologist with peer-reviewed research published on the behavior, ecology, and population dynamics of Alaskan moose. I am also Executive Director of Western Watersheds Project, a nonprofit conservation group working to protect and restore wildlife and watersheds throughout the American West, an organization that has submitted comments on the management and disposition of wild horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP). Western Watersheds Project focuses on ecological land health, but also has developed organizational expertise on the viability of rare species, and has looked into the role of wild horses in Intermountain West ecosystems (which admittedly are somewhat different from the Great Plains ecosystems of Theodore Roosevelt National Park). Despite having perennial bunchgrasses less tolerant to heavy grazing than the sod-forming grasses of the Great Plains, we have found that wild horses have a lighter ecological impact, animal-for-animal, than domestic cattle and sheep.

Small and isolated populations of animals are at elevated risk of extirpation, both due to stochastic (i.e., random) events such as disease outbreaks or severe weather events, and due to long-term declines driven by the loss of genetic viability. Scientists have established, as a general rule, that a population must be kept above an effective number of breeding animals (N_e) of 100 in order to avoid the steady loss of genetic diversity and the genetic problems (birth defects, inbreeding depression which reduces offspring survival) that accompany inbreeding.¹ The N_e calculation is made based on an equation that weights the total number of a population required to achieve an absolutely equal ratio of males and females actively participating in breeding in a given year, with the understanding that for some species (like wild horses or sage grouse, for example), a few males will do most of the breeding with many females, skewing the sex ratio of breeding animals. In such circumstances, the total population will need to be substantially larger than 100 in order to get the genetic equivalent of 50 males breeding equally with 50 females. For wild horses, I have used the correction factor derived in a study of wild horse breeding on the Pryor Mountain wild horse range in Montana² to determine that the total population of wild horses required to achieve a genetically viable population with $N_e = 100$ is 278 total animals. The present population of wild horses in

¹ Frankham et al., 2014. Genetics in conservation management: Revised recommendations for the 50/500 rules, Red List criteria and population viability analyses. *Biol. Conserv.* 170: 56-63.

² Singer et al., 2000. A demographic analysis, group dynamics, and genetic effective number in the Pryor wild horse population, 1992-1997. Pp. 73-89 in *Ecological Studies of the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, 1992-1997*. Fort Collins, CO: US Geological Survey.

TRNP at present is substantially smaller than this critical threshold, and the population is isolated from other wild horse herds.

Wild horses in TRNP, like wild horse herds on western lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service farther west, have been subjected to fairly heavy-handed and intensive management by federal agencies. I am aware that the use of chemical birth controls is occurring in TRNP, in particular the chemical operating under the trade name GonaCon, which is designed to induce long-term (or even permanent) sterility in the interest of reducing herbivore population numbers. The effect of subtracting breeding adults permanently from the population is to lose their genetic contribution to future generations of the population, resulting in a long-term reduction in genetic diversity and a trend toward inbreeding. For this reason, the use of GonaCon is disfavored for use as a wild horse birth control method, especially so in small and isolated populations like the one inhabiting TRNP. Where birth control through darting is desired, the use of porcine zona pellucida (PZP) is more widely accepted, as it results in only temporary loss of breeding ability of 18 to 24 months, a reversible outcome that allows darted females to resume breeding, and contributing their genetic complement to the gene pool, once the drug wears off.


Because the TRNP wild horse population is significantly smaller than 278 individuals, it is particularly vulnerable to adverse genetic consequences of subtracting individual animals permanently from the breeding population.

The National Park Service is an agency with limited experience and capability in actively managing wild species, in significant measure due to the fact that they typically allow natural regulation of the wildlife inhabiting their park system. This is a good thing, in the overwhelming majority of situations. But it does not place the agency in the most advantageous position in actively managing a wild horse population, as they are presently attempting to do. Having more voices in the discussion to help inform NPS in its decision-making process could, in this instance, be beneficial.

It may also be true that TRNP might benefit from an expansion in acreage if it is determined that 278 wild horses require a larger land and forage base to thrive while also meeting the NPS legal requirements that direct the agency to manage for healthy, natural ecosystems. If this is the case, land swaps and other measures to expand Park boundaries would benefit not just wild horses, but bison and other species as well, and I hope that the legislature would also be supportive of such solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspectives, and I wish you the best in your deliberations.

Respectfully yours,


Erik Molvar



Senate State and Local Government Committee

SB2331. A BILL for an Act to create and enact a new section to chapter 54-60 of the North Dakota Century Code, relating to the Theodore Roosevelt national park working group; to provide a report; and to provide an appropriation.

My name is Sandra Hagen Solin - I am the Colorado-based lobbyist for American Wild Horse Conservation (AWHC), the nation's leading wild horse protection organization and operator of the world's largest wild horse fertility program, in Nevada.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB2331 to create a state-led working group to manage the Theodore Roosevelt wild horses.

We have first-hand experience, working closely with Governor Jared Polis and bi-partisan sponsors of this innovative bill approach, in Colorado, where the Colorado Wild Horse Working Group, on which I represent AWHC, recently published an encouraging Year 1 progress report. We would be happy to share this report with committee members.

Backed by \$1.5m of state funding, this collaboration model represents a forward-thinking approach to reducing wild horse roundups and addressing the long-term needs of wild horses that have already been removed from the wild.

Similar to the structure envisioned in North Dakota, the Colorado group is built around core on-range and off-range objectives.

On-range, that means coordination of enhanced and supplemental stewardship of horses in-the-wild, including dedicated funding for full-time fertility control darting.

Specifically, Colorado has pledged \$100,000 of the \$1.5M to assist with fertility vaccines to wild horses in 2025, enabling the US Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services to train eight darters to supplement existing volunteer efforts.

We support the use of proven, scientific, and humane fertility control methods, such as PZP (porcine zona pellucida), in the Theodore Roosevelt wild horse herd and believe this will provide for careful management that can lower birth rates while maintaining the genetic viability of this herd.

By way of illustration, Nevada's Virginia Range, reported a 66% reduction in foal birth rates in 2023 compared to 2022 and a total herd population reduction of 20% over the same period, without the removal of a single wild horse.



Additionally, in Arizona, PZP has been in use since 2019 to manage the Salt River horses and has achieved a below zero population growth rate as of 2021. In Colorado, PZP has been in use in the Spring Creek Basin HMA since 2012, where the wild horse population has been stabilized and no horses have been removed since 2011.

Off-range working group solutions are built around humane, non-lethal alternatives for wild horses taken off-range or held in federal holding facilities, creating partnerships for successful adoptions and quality assurance to support adoption networks.

We believe this model is replicable in North Dakota and we are encouraged by the innovative, multi-stakeholder approach envisaged by SB2331.

We applaud the bill's bipartisan sponsors for coming together to care for and protect the majestic Theodore Roosevelt herd and urge members of the Senate State and Local Government Committee to support the passage of SB2331.

Would be very willing to answer any bill-related questions the Committee may have to ensure the success of a new Wild Horse Working Group for North Dakota.

For the record, AWHC is also in support of concurrent legislation SCR 4006 calling for federal protections for this historic herd which we believe would be complementary legislation to SB2331.

Testimony in Support of SCR4006
January 31, 2025

To the Sixty Ninth Legislative Assembly of North Dakota:

I write in support of SCR4006, a resolution requesting the legislature to urge the U.S. Congress to devise and impose federal protection for the wild horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I studied the horses for the National Park Service (NPS) between 1987-1990, compiling a lengthy cultural history of the herd and its management by the NPS.

Federal protection is necessary to ensure that this historic wild horse herd remains in the Little Missouri Badlands, where wild horses have existed since at least the late nineteenth century. The horses embody the history of North Dakota, since they originated from both ranch and Native American herds. Theodore Roosevelt and other open-range ranchers described and wrote about their presence, and the horses have been a unique and popular attraction since the establishment of the national park honoring the twenty-sixth president. They draw both North Dakotans and out of state tourists to the park and the Medora area and are now followed on social media by people around the world.

Despite their popularity and significance, Theodore Roosevelt National Park has sought to eliminate the herd several times during the past sixty years. However, they were kept as a “historic demonstration herd” that evoked Roosevelt and North Dakota’s open range ranching era. In 2022, the park announced that Roosevelt’s ranching career was no longer part of their mission and began an Environmental Assessment (EA) process to remove the resident horses and longhorn cattle. Because North Dakota state officials and thousands of residents opposed the removal of the horses, Senator Hoeven intervened, and the EA was aborted.

Unfortunately, I have no confidence that the National Park Service will voluntarily retain the horses and manage them to ensure their long-term health and viability. The park has not made a public commitment to keeping the herd forever, and their continuing efforts to sterilize the mares by using Gona Con, an immunosuppressant, suggests that they have simply found a new strategy for eliminating the herd. Put bluntly, I believe that to be their intention.

Only federal protection will secure their future. Please pass this resolution to ensure that the wild horses remain part of North Dakota’s history and landscape for coming generations.

Thank you for your consideration,

Irene Castle McLaughlin, Ph.D.
Belmont, MA

Testimony in support of SB2331
February 4, 2025

To the Sixty-ninth Legislative Assembly of North Dakota:

I write in support of SB 2331, a bill that would add a new section to chapter 54-60 of the North Dakota Century Code to create a “Theodore Roosevelt National Park Wild Horse Working Group” and provide an appropriation of \$50,000 to fund administrative costs for the first two years. During this time, the ten-member group would define their goals and assignments and develop a budget. The proposed working group is modeled after similar advisory partnerships in other states with federally managed wild horse herds.

SB 2331 is a companion piece to SCR 4006, a resolution requesting federal protection for the wild horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Wild horses have been present in the Little Missouri Badlands since at least the late nineteenth century and are a living symbol of North Dakota’s ranching history. They are beloved by generations of North Dakotans and a key draw for tourists who visit the park. Because the National Park Service (NPS) continues to seek ways to eliminate the herd despite overwhelming opposition from North Dakota citizens and officials, federal protection is imperative to ensure that the horses remain in the park for future generations.

North Dakota state officials fought to prevent the NPS from removing the wild horse herd between 2022-2024 because the horses and the open range ranching era they represent are meaningful to North Dakotans and important for state tourism. North Dakota must have a voice in their management. The working group will provide a mechanism for diverse North Dakota stakeholders to engage with park staff on issues of wild horse management and provide related support and advice for the mutual benefit of both state and federal interests. When former governor Doug Bergum offered to initiate a federal/state collaboration, NPS officials declined, fearing that it might be abandoned by future state officials. This bill would codify the working group and ensure that the knowledge and interests of North Dakota policy makers, subject experts, and residents are expressed and taken into consideration when the NPS makes decisions about the management of the horses.

It is apparent that the people of North Dakota are deeply invested in ensuring that the horses remain in the badlands. I urge you to vote in support of 2331, so that North Dakotans can play a role in crafting their future.

Thank you for your consideration,

Irene Castle McLaughlin, PhD.

Author, “The History and Status of the Wild Horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park” (1989) and “Badlands Broomtails: The Cultural History of Wild Horses in Western North Dakota” (1991)

RESOLUTION NO. 2024-15

WHEREAS, The Board of County Commissioners have adopted a Land Use Plan which recognizes the importance of energy development, agriculture and stock raising, and tourism as being important to the residents of Billings County; and

WHEREAS, The Board of County Commissioners have, in the past, and now reaffirm the importance to the community, the state, and the Nation of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park; and

WHEREAS, The Board of County Commissioners have, in the past, and now reaffirm the importance of horses roaming free in the TRNP; and

WHEREAS, The Board of County Commissioners recognize the efforts of Senator John Hoeven in supporting the continued existence and health viability of the horses in the TRNP and confirm their support of his efforts and the agreements he has supported with the TRNP;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED:

The Board of County Commissioners to support the continued existence of a healthy, genetically viable, herd of horses in the TRNP as being entirely consistent with the values adopted by the County in its land use plans and in its support of tourism generally throughout the County and specifically within the confines of TRNP.

Dated at Medora, ND, this _____ day of _____, 2024.

BILLINGS COUNTY, NORTH DAKOTA

By: _____
Lester Iverson, Board Chairman

Attest: _____
Marcia Kessel, County Auditor/Treasurer

RESOLUTION NO. 01-2023

A RESOLUTION URGING THE U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TO PRESERVE THE HORSES RESIDING WITHIN THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK AND URGING THE U.S. CONGRESS TO ASSIST WITH PRESERVING THIS HISTORIC HERD.

WHEREAS the National Park Service has stated the Service's intentions to eliminate the horses from Theodore Roosevelt National Park; and

WHEREAS the National Park Service was established by Congress in 1916 through the Organic Act (54 U.S.C. § 100101 et seq.), which provides that the National Park Service "shall . . . conserve the scenery, natural and historic objects, and wild life [and] provide for the enjoyment of the scenery, natural and historic objects, and wild life in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations;" and

WHEREAS the horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park are acknowledged, by the National Park Service among others, as historically and culturally significant to the State of North Dakota and the history of the United States; and

WHEREAS the horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park were a significant part of President Theodore Roosevelt's experience in the State of North Dakota, now serving as a living legacy to President Roosevelt, and are important to maintaining the historical setting of his era; and

WHEREAS the late Robert Utley, former Chief Historian for the National Park Service has repeatedly stated that the horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park were an inherently significant resource that fell under Sec. 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966; and

WHEREAS the horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park bring tourism to the state and the City of Historic Medora and elimination of the herd poses economic concerns for the local businesses and negatively impacts preservation and appreciation of our state's and community's history; and

WHEREAS the last public comment period for this management planning process in April of 2022 generated 1,774 responses from all 50 states and 58 countries, showing national and international interest in the horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF HISTORIC MEDORA, NORTH DAKOTA:

Section 1. That the findings contained in the Preamble of this Resolution are determined to be true and correct and are hereby adopted.

Section 2. Be It Resolved, that the City of Medora hereby urges the National Park Service to preserve the horses residing within Theodore Roosevelt National Park and urges the U.S. Congress to assist with preserving this historic herd.

Section 3. This Resolution shall be passed finally on the date of its introduction and shall take effect immediately upon its passage and approval by the City Council.

ADOPTED



Todd Comeil, Mayor

ATTEST:



Anna Moe, Medora Auditor

Final Passage: 07-11-2023

RESOLUTION NO. 01-2024

A RESOLUTION URGING THE U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TO PRESERVE A GENETICALLY VIABLE HERD OF WILD HORSES RESIDING WITHIN THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK.

WHEREAS, by its Resolution No. 01-2023, the City of Medora urged the National Park Service to preserve the horses residing within Theodore Roosevelt National Park and urged the U.S. Congress to assist with preserving this historic herd; and

WHEREAS, the City of Medora has and now continues to reaffirm the importance to the community of the wild horses residing in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP); and

WHEREAS, the horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park bring tourism to the state and the City of Historic Medora and elimination of a genetically viable herd poses economic concerns for the local businesses and negatively impacts preservation and appreciation of our state's and community's history;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF HISTORIC MEDORA, NORTH DAKOTA:

Section 1. That the findings contained in the Preamble of this Resolution are determined to be true and correct and are hereby adopted.

Section 2. Be It Resolved, that the City of Medora hereby urges the National Park Service to preserve a healthy and genetically viable herd of horses residing within Theodore Roosevelt National Park and urges the U.S. Congress to assist with preserving this historic herd.

Section 3. This Resolution shall be passed finally on the date of its introduction and shall take effect immediately upon its passage and approval by the City Council.

ADOPTED

Doug Ellison, Acting Interim Mayor

ATTEST:

Ivy Maus, Medora Auditor
Final Passage:

RESOLUTION NO. 02-2024

A RESOLUTION URGING THE U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE TO SUSPEND THE OCTOBER 2024 HORSE ROUNDUP AND PRESERVE A GENETICALLY VIABLE HERD OF WILD HORSES WITHIN THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK.

WHEREAS, by its Resolution No. 01-2023, the City of Medora urged the National Park Service to preserve the horses residing within Theodore Roosevelt National Park and urged the U.S. Congress to assist with preserving this historic herd; and

WHEREAS, by its Resolution No. 01-2024, the City of Medora urged the National Park Service to preserve a healthy and genetically viable herd of horses residing within Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

WHEREAS, the City of Medora has and now continues to reaffirm the importance to the community of the wild horses residing in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP); and

WHEREAS, the horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park bring tourism to the state and the City of Historic Medora and elimination of a genetically viable herd poses economic concerns for the local businesses and negatively impacts preservation and appreciation of our state's and community's history;

WHEREAS, the National Park Service has announced plans to remove horses from the herd and conduct additional fertility control to halt reproduction of the horses; and

WHEREAS, there are significant concerns regarding the genetic viability of the herd, and fertility control would further exacerbate these concerns;

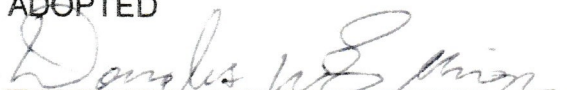
NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF HISTORIC MEDORA, NORTH DAKOTA:

Section 1. That the findings contained in the Preamble of this Resolution are determined to be true and correct and are hereby adopted.

Section 2. Be It Resolved, that the City of Medora hereby urges the National Park Service to immediately suspend the October 2024 scheduled horse roundup and halt removals and fertility control until experts fully assess and produce a current report regarding the genetic viability of the herd in order to preserve a healthy and viable herd of horses residing within Theodore Roosevelt National Park for generations to come.

Section 3. This Resolution shall be passed finally on the date of its introduction and shall take effect immediately upon its passage and approval by the City Council.

ADOPTED



Doug Ellison, Acting Interim Mayor

ATTEST:



Ivy Maus, Medora Auditor