

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. The horses are beloved by generations of North Dakotans, draw thousands of tourists to the park annually, and are followed by many more people on social media.

The National Park Service (NPS) formerly considered the horses to be an “historic demonstration herd” that aided their interpretation of Theodore Roosevelt’s ranching experiences during the open range era. However, in 2022 they announced that they no longer considered ranching history part of their mission and began an Environmental Assessment (EA) process to eliminate both the wild horses and the longhorn cattle in the park. When North Dakota state officials and thousands of residents opposed the removal of the horses, Senator Hoeven intervened, and the EA was aborted during the spring of 2024.

However, the NPS has not publicly committed to maintaining the horses forever and to managing the herd to promote their health and survival. Park staff have long been ambivalent about the horses and have sought ways to remove them in the past. Unfortunately, since the EA process was abandoned, they seem to have found a way to quietly “work around” keeping the herd by sterilizing the mares with Gona Con, an immunosuppressant. I believe their intention is to sterilize the herd and let the horses die in the park without reproducing.

Federal protection is the only way to ensure that the horses remain in the park for future generations. And North Dakota must have a voice in their management. 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.

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)