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We agree. Arizona's Salt River horse plan is a smart move | Opinion

We all love the Salt River horses, but the herd has become too big. We believe the state's management plan is the right approach to keep them healthy

John Koleszar, Robin Silver, Scott Garlid and Charles Babbitt For The Republic

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If you've floated on the Salt River on a summer afternoon, you know the moment. The canyon opens up, the water slows, and there they are — horses, standing in the shallows or grazing the banks. It is genuinely a remarkable thing to see.

The four organizations signing this piece understand completely why Arizonans love them, but these horses and the landscape they inhabit require management.

We come from different sides of the wildlife world — hunters, anglers, conservationists and environmental advocates who do not always agree. But we are writing together because Arizona is finally doing something right on Salt River horse management, and it deserves to be supported.

How will the Salt River herd be managed?

The affection people feel for these horses is real. These are beautiful animals. There is something powerful about seeing them in a wild setting. But affection, by itself, is not a management plan. The 274 horses currently living in the Salt River Horse Management Area depend on daily supplemental feeding to survive, a fact invisible to most visitors on the river.

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The range's natural carrying capacity, established by multiple scientific assessments, is between 35 and 50 horses. Loving the horses and managing them responsibly are not the same thing. Confusing the two has real consequences for every other species sharing that land.

The Arizona Department of Agriculture has chosen to manage responsibly. Under a new [five-year contract](#) with the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group, the plan is to reach a herd size of 120 — gradually, through natural attrition, fertility control, and humane relocation of approximately 25 horses per year into AZDA-approved sanctuaries. No roundups are proposed by this measured, accountable process overseen by the state. The goal is a herd that the land can actually sustain without artificial feeding.

Why did the state act now on herd management?

Here is the conversation that rarely happens in public: The question before Arizonans is not whether the herd will be managed — it will be. The question is who does it, and how.

The Tonto National Forest is federal land. Arizona's ability to manage this herd exists only because of a [cooperative agreement](#) with the U.S. Forest Service. The agreement depends on Arizona demonstrating credible, science-based stewardship. When that credibility is abandoned — when state law is used to block the very management the land requires, Arizona does not protect the horses. It hands the decision to federal agencies, whose approaches have historically been far less considerate than what AZDA is proposing to do now.

Our diverse organizations have disagreed about hunting, grazing and predator policy. But we agree on this: science-based management is not a threat to the things Arizonans love about their public lands, it is what keeps them worth loving.

The [Salt River horses](#) can remain part of Arizona's story, but only if the state is allowed to manage them as proposed. We urge Arizonans, and their elected representatives, to support AZDA's approach.

John Koleszar is past president of Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation. Robin Silver is cofounder and board member of Center for Biological Diversity. Scott Garlid is executive director, Arizona Wildlife Federation. Charles Babbitt is conservation chair, Maricopa Bird Alliance.