

# Horse Rescuer

Neda DeMayo battles the government to stop the roundup—and slaughter—of wild horses

**L**isten well and you will hear it—a low, distant rumble like thunder. It is the sound of a herd of wild horses, but what it really is, Neda DeMayo will tell you, is the sound of America. “These horses are unique to the United States,” she says of the stallions and mares that roam free through parts of 10 U.S. states. “They represent the pioneer spirit of the American West.”

Now this freedom, and the horses themselves, are being threatened.

In December, Montana Republican Sen. Conrad Burns slipped a last-minute amendment onto a 4,000-page appropriations bill that lifted a federal ban on the sale and slaughter of wild horses and burros, animals that had been protected by the government since 1971. The Bureau of Land Management estimates there are 37,000 horses and burros roaming across public rangelands in the West—by their count, this is 9,000 too many. Their concern is that the herds are depleting lands



DeMayo and Sutter at her Lompoc sanctuary.

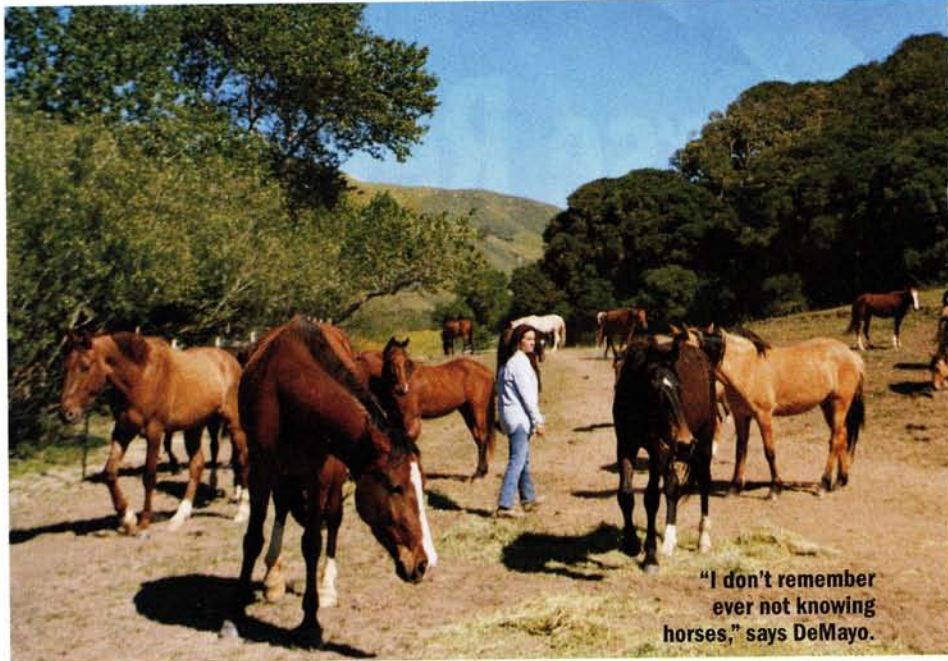
**Lifting the ban on the sale of wild horses “opens the floodgates for their slaughter,” says DeMayo, who shelters 220 horses on her land (below).**



## Controversy

where privately owned cattle also graze. As a result of the amendment, the bureau is now authorized to round up and sell thousands of these horses.

Neda DeMayo—who runs Return to Freedom, a 300-acre wild-horse sanctuary in Lompoc, Calif.—is leading the charge to reinstate the ban. Taking these horses off public lands “is the same as ripping someone away from their family and their home,” says DeMayo. “They live in social groups just like humans.” There is also the risk that—despite assurances from the BLM that it would sell horses only to owners with an interest in their welfare—some of the horses will be slaughtered for their meat, which is shipped overseas. Indeed, since the Burns amendment passed, at least 41 horses have been slaughtered. In the case of six horses killed on April 18, “the man who purchased them said they were for a church youth group; he then turned around and sold them to a slaughterhouse,” admits Senator Burns. On April 25 the BLM agreed to stop



“I don’t remember ever not knowing horses,” says DeMayo.

selling horses while it investigates the slaughters. “We want to make sure we do everything possible to promote positive outcomes for these animals,” says the bureau’s director, Kathleen Clarke.

Not good enough, says DeMayo, who wants the program scrapped altogether. The recent slaughters “were atrocious,” she says, “and expose this provision for what it really is.” Tanned and toned in her faded jeans and well-worn cowboy boots, the 45-year-old former fashion stylist (she once worked for Sandra Bullock and David Duchovny) has loved horses since she was a child near New Haven, Conn. She was 8 when she got her first: a black Morgan mix named Sam. “I’d ride him into town and to the Dairy Queen,” she recalls. In 1998 she bought a defunct chicken farm in Lompoc and turned it into her sanctuary. Today she can name each of the 220 horses—most of which she rescued or adopted—on her land. Now divorced, she and six staffers rely on donations and grants to cover expenses and on

local veterinarians to pitch in their time for free.

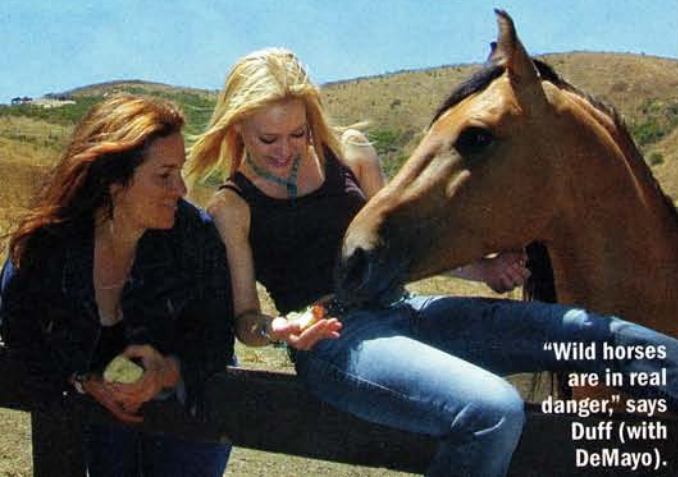
DeMayo has also rallied some Hollywood A-Listers to her cause (see box). And she has political support as well: Bills introduced in both the House and Senate seek to repeal the Burns amendment. “We feared [the slaughtering] would happen; we prayed it would not,” says West Virginia Democratic Rep. Nick Rahall, who coauthored the House bill. While Senator Burns claims that so far 2,000 wild horses have found good homes—proof, he says, “that the program is working”—DeMayo advocates thinning the herds by darting the mares with a contraceptive vaccine. “The goal is not to zero-out or destroy a herd,” she says. “It’s to control reproduction so you don’t have to do removals.”

Standing by a wooden rail fence surrounding a grass pasture, DeMayo allows a majestic palomino named Sutter to trot up and nuzzle her neck. “He thinks I’m his mare,” she says. It is clear why DeMayo will fight tooth and nail to repeal the Burns amendment: She sees something in these horses that many others don’t. She sees families. “They are born to live in herds,” she says. “Why would we want to take that away from anyone?”

By Alex Tresniowski. Fannie Weinstein  
in Lompoc

## MUSTANG HILARY

DeMayo has wrangled some Hollywood hotshots to help in her crusade to save wild horses. Viggo Mortensen—who starred in the horse-race epic *Hidalgo*—filmed a public announcement on behalf of the cause, while Hilary Duff serves as Return to Freedom’s official youth ambassador. “I believe so much in the work that Neda and all her staff and volunteers do to provide a sanctuary for these horses,” says Duff. “I’d like children from all over the country to be able to see these majestic horses in their natural environment. They are national treasures.”



“Wild horses are in real danger,” says Duff (with DeMayo).