



January 30, 2023

Angie Richman
Superintendent
Theodore Roosevelt National Park
P.O. Box 7
Medora, ND 58645

RE: National Park Service Livestock Plan for Horses at Theodore Roosevelt National Park

Dear Superintendent Richman,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comment on the alternatives developed by the National Park Service (NPS) for management of the horse and cattle herds at Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP), North Dakota's top tourism destination.

Over 500 years ago, European colonists introduced horses to the North American mainland. Horses have been a common sight on our landscape since long before North Dakota became a state in 1889.

As the NPS has noted, wild horses were already established in the North Dakota Badlands when President Truman signed the bill creating Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park in 1947 and when it received official national park status in 1978. For decades upon decades, these horses have coexisted peacefully with the national park and, in the process, have become a hugely popular attraction and an indelible symbol of the untamed character of the Badlands.

While there is no data linking TRNP visitation directly to the horses, one needs only to look at the outpouring of passionate comments and personal stories being shared with the NPS, elected representatives and local, state and national media outlets to understand that these wild horses are a major tourist attraction treasured by hundreds of thousands of visitors and social media followers from near and far.

Removing these horses from the park, or reducing the herd size to a level that fails to support genetic diversity and longevity, would strike a blow not only to park visitation but also to the economic vitality of Medora, nearby communities including Dickinson, and our entire state. Data compiled for our state Tourism Division shows TRNP was the top point of interest for travelers in

our state last year, accounting for 770,000 trips – more than half of those being visitors from out of state. In Billings County, home to Medora and the South Unit, visitor spending totaled more than \$16 million in 2021.

We understand that management of feral horses is a constant challenge for the NPS and other U.S. lands, with more than 82,000 wild horses and burros nationwide according to the Bureau of Land Management. On your [website](#), you have acknowledged that “Horses are ingrained in our nation’s history, representing the old West, freedom, and beauty in many people’s minds,” but added that “The presence of feral horses in several park units is a challenge because they exhaust the park’s natural resources with overgrazing, degradation of natural water sources, and out-competing native wildlife as their populations grow and grow.” Your efforts to manage these herds and protect our beautiful national parks are deeply appreciated. We would offer to meet face-to-face with the National Park Service to explore opportunities for collaboration to help address these challenges at TRNP, as we recognize that the park is often underfunded despite trillions of dollars in federal spending.

We believe the wild horses in TRNP are worthy of your best management efforts, not only because of their positive impact on the park experience and tourism economy but also because of the deep connection they create to the park’s namesake. Theodore Roosevelt recorded his observation of wild horses during his ranching days in the Badlands in the 1880s, writing, “In a great many – indeed, in most – localities there are wild horses to be found, which, although invariably of domestic descent, being either themselves runaways from some ranch or Indian outfit, or else claiming such for their sires and dams, yet are quite as wild as the antelope on whose domain they have intruded.”

Roosevelt also famously stated: “I have always said I would not have been President had it not been for my experience in North Dakota. It was here that the romance of my life began.” To this day, the wild horses in TRNP continue to evoke that sense of romanticism, adding to the ruggedness and otherworldly intrigue of the Badlands.

The NPS has said the park’s mission is to preserve Roosevelt’s conservation legacy and not his ranching legacy, yet the two cannot and should not be separated. Roosevelt famously said, “Conservation means development as much as it does protection.” Ranching is development, and ranchers continue to play a vital role in conservation and the protection of our natural resources in North Dakota. To preserve one side of Roosevelt’s conservation philosophy while dismissing the other is a disservice to his legacy and misses a golden opportunity to teach current and future generations about his critical role in the modern conservation movement – which will be prominently featured at the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum under development in Medora.

With less than 200 horses at TRNP, and given the vast resources of the federal government and vast size of the 46,000-acre South Unit, we have every confidence the NPS can find a way to manage the wild horses in a manner and herd size that supports genetic diversity and protects the environmental integrity and capacity of the park for current and future generations of visitors. The State of North Dakota stands ready to meet to discuss collaboration to assist in this effort. Thank you for your consideration.

With gratitude,



Doug Burgum
Governor of North Dakota