

US House OKs bill to protect Corolla herd

By Cindy Beamon
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CURRITUCK —The Corolla Wild Horses are getting a second chance at becoming a federally protected herd — a move supporters say is crucial to their survival.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Corolla Wild Horses Protection Act this week without opposition by lawmakers frequently divided along party lines.

Now the bill heads to the Senate for another try after a similar bill died in committee last year.

Congressman Walter B. Jones, R-N.C., sponsor of the bill on both go-rounds, said he believes the bill has a better chance of passing this time.

He's hoping strong bipartisan support in the House will spur U.S. Sen. Kay Hagan, D-N.C., to rally support from the Democrat-led Senate. Jones said earlier he was disappointed that Hagan didn't do more to get the bill through the Senate the first time.

"This is what the people in Northeastern North Carolina want, the majority of them," said Jones.

In an e-mail response Friday, Hagan said she supports protecting the horses.

"The Corolla wild horses are an important part of North Carolina's heritage, and my goal is to preserve the genetic viability of the herd so future generations can enjoy these beautiful horses," said Hagan. "I will continue working with my colleagues and stakeholders in North Carolina to find a solution that protects the horses."

Karen McCalpin, executive director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, a nonprofit that manages the herd, said the Spanish Mustangs' popularity and powerful lobbyists in Washington should boost the bill's chances this time. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the U.S. Humane Society, and the Animal Welfare Institute are backing the bill.

She thinks some misunderstandings about the bill, and Ducks Unlimited's powerful lobby against it, may have prevented the legislation from going farther last time.

"We are all working hard to make sure the correct information gets to the Senate this time," said McCalpin.

Both Jones and McCalpin say differences between horse supporters and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which argues the horses disturb the habitat of migratory waterfowl, can be worked out.

McCalpin points to the success of the Shackelford herd at Cape Lookout National Seashore as an example of how horses can co-exist with other wildlife. Even the Corolla herd, reported to number 5,000

on the Outer Banks in 1920s, thrived alongside Currituck's waterfowl, so plentiful in those days that market hunting was allowed, she said.

Jones said the conflict can be resolved.

"God's creatures can live together whether they be horses or beetles or birds," said Jones.

House Bill 126 directs the Secretary of the Interior to enter an agreement with the Corolla Wild Horse Fund to manage a herd of 110-130 horses. The bill also allows a few horses from the Shackleford herd to be added to the Currituck population to create genetic diversity. Equine experts have said the Outer Banks herd is doomed to die off after generations of inbreeding without the exchange.

An expired management plan approved in 2007 called for a herd size of 60 horses. The Corolla Wild Horse Fund has sought to enlarge the herd size under a new agreement, but so far U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has resisted. McCalpin said the herd-size limit was set before research indicated that more horses were needed for the herd to survive.

Currently, Corolla Wild Horse Fund manages a herd of 119 horses, according to an aerial count last September.