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An Exclusive Interview

Former Sen. Conrad Burns

By Steven Long



In the world of equine welfare there may be no person subject to derision than former Montana Sen. Conrad Burns. An ardent supporter of horses as a commodity to be sold for whatever reason their owner deems profitable, the former auctioneer lost his seat in the U.S. Senate to a farmer, Jon Tester, after passage of the Burns Amendment. The law was passed in the dead of night after it was attached to an appropriations bill nobody had read. For the first time, in an exclusive interview with Horseback Magazine, Burns how revocation of the law came about.

HORSEBACK MAGAZINE: You're a lobbyist now, right?

CONRAD BURNS: Well, I've only got one client I lobby, but right now I'm doing a lot more international consulting.

HORSEBACK: Well good for you. Who are you lobbying for?

BURNS: The Quarter Horse Association.

HORSEBACK: The AQHA?

BURNS: Yep

HORSEBACK: We support them in every way we can in our little magazine.

BURNS: Yep, that's right. How're you doing?

HORSEBACK: Old and fat Sir, old and fat.

BURNS: I can relate to that.

HORSEBACK: I'm working on this story that's going on up in Montana with the Pryor Mountain wild horses. In my research I obviously ran across the Burns Amendment. Can you tell me how that came about and what prompted it?

BURNS: Well, Harry Reid came to me and said, 'I've got a problem in Nevada.' And I said I said 'What kind of a problem do you have?' because we don't have a problem up in Montana.

HORSEBACK: So what happened then?

BURNS: So he and I, up in his office, got together and we crafted that amendment because they've really got that problem of over grazing down there. That's how that came about.

HORSEBACK: It was actually Reid's idea, huh?

BURNS: Yeah, well it was his problem. I just helped him solve it, that's all.

HORSEBACK: Well, you did a pretty good job of it.

BURNS: I don't think they've sold any or anything like that. It wasn't really designed for that. The premise of it was to take a strong look at how we manage our resources and how they affect the herd of the horses.

HORSEBACK: One thing I can't figure out with this BLM stuff for the life of me is if you have millions of acres of vacant land and there's 100 miles between towns, why on earth can't they put all those wild horses out there and nobody would ever care.

BURNS: Well, you see, some of that country won't sustain them year round. You've got spring growth, which is fine, but if you are a rancher, then you've got the dry season, and you've got to save some of your country for pasture and you've got to have supplemental feeding. And when you fly over that country and look down there, there's something down there, you just don't see it,, There's sheep herds, and there's also a few cattle run on that same country. They're managed because you can't just graze the whole thing off in the summer and then expect those animals to go through a very tough winter.

HORSEBACK: One more question Senator. What do you think about this EU thing on the slaughter issue? That just kind of stopped everything dead in its tracks, didn't it/

BURNS: I don't know a lot about it but I know one thing. We don't have any slaughter plants here. That seems like that's a problem Canada and Mexico are going to have to solve. I think they are still accepting horsemeat for human consumption.

HORSEBACK: They are, until April when the EU says horses have to be in quarantine for six months.

BURNS: I think we will probably have some science that will disprove that it takes that long for residue to dispel. I'm not sure, but I'm going to let the veterinarians and the folks who handle horses to make the decision. As you know, we've got lots of people who've got lots of ideas, but six months is a long time.

HORSEBACK: Well thank you Senator. I'm glad to hear you're doing well.

BURNS: I'm still grazing the green side.