

FACT CHECKER: JOHN BARILARO & FERAL HORSES

UPDATED: FEBRUARY 2019

NSW Deputy Premier John Barilaro has repeated common misconceptions regarding feral horses and their management in Kosciuszko National Park. This fact checker provides a reality check to these misconceptions, setting the record straight.



NSW Deputy Premier John Barilaro. Photo: CEBIT Australia | CC BY 2.0

Background

John Barilaro is the NSW Deputy Premier, member for Monaro and leader of the NSW Nationals Party.

In 2018 he introduced and pushed through NSW Parliament a bill that protects feral horses within Kosciuszko National Park at the expense of the park's natural values. Feral horses are recognised in NSW as a key threat to native wildlife and have been listed by the state's Threatened Species Scientific Committee as a key threatening process under the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Once enacted the bill became the *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act 2018*.

Feral horses adversely affect threatened species and ecological communities, and could drive other native species or ecological communities towards threatened status.

The deputy premier has continually repeated misconceptions regarding feral horses and their management. This fact checker sets the record straight.

FACT CHECK 1

Feral horse numbers will be reduced

John Barilaro said during an interview on Radio 666 on 22 November 2018:

"My approach is one of, bringing the parties together, finding the middle ground, reducing the numbers ... in two to three years' time ... you will actually see a reduction in horses we've never seen before."

At a Jindabyne candidates forum on 1 March 2019 he said his new law will achieve "a fifty percent reduction immediately" of horses.

REALITY CHECK

John Barilaro's approach has been to reject a horse management plan developed over three years through extensive public consultation and impose his own solution.

By reducing control options to just two methods, relocation and trapping and rehoming, there is little chance horse numbers will be reduced.

Trapping and rehoming or trucking to an abattoir was the method employed during the life of the 2008 Horse Management Plan. During this time horse numbers continued to increase and horses expanded into sensitive horse-

free areas. These methods were costly and time consuming. To stabilise horse numbers, removal rates must exceed yearly population growth. An average of 97 horses a year and a maximum of 199 were rehomed over the past ten years, yet in the same period an average yearly total horse removal rate of 325 failed to prevent population growth.

Horse relocation is difficult and will impact new areas. With more than 50 per cent of the park already occupied by feral horses, there will be few areas horses can be introduced without unacceptable impacts.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2QSguZC>

FACT CHECK 2

Brumby Bill does not override national parks legislation

John Barilaro posted to his Facebook page on 12 October 2018:

"The Brumby Bill does not impact or override the Nationals Park Act nor the Kosciuszko National Parks Plan of Management."

REALITY CHECK

The new law that protects introduced horses in Kosciuszko National Park overrides the protection provided by the National Parks Act 1974 in two ways.



The Reclaim Kosci campaign has been created to overturn the NSW Government decision to protect destructive feral horses at the expense of Kosciuszko National Park's incredible natural values.

ReclaimKosci.org.au | www.facebook.com/ReclaimKosci | twitter.com/ReclaimKosci



Horse wallows in Kosciuszko National Park have spread, some knee deep, and erosion is spreading at river crossings.

1. The Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act directly overrides the Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management. The horse protection act explicitly states that a wild horse heritage management plan ‘prevails to the extent of any inconsistency between’ such a plan and any national park plan of management.” (Section 12 (1))
2. The horse plan is not required to adhere to the conservation rules for national park management spelt out in the National Parks and Wildlife Act. This means that unlike all other activities carried out by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in a national park, the requirement to adhere to the park management principles such as the ‘conservation of biodiversity’ and the ‘maintenance of ecosystem function’ can be ignored.

All that is required is for a horse plan to ‘take into account’ the broad objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, which offers little comfort. (Section 5(2) (d)).

With the national park rules subverted, feral horses are protected and allowed to flourish, regardless of the damage caused.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2AsQTRs>

FACT CHECK 3

Horses will continue to be removed

John Barilaro, during debate of the legislation on 2 June 2018 said:

“Trapping and rehoming programs will continue – they will not end.”

REALITY CHECK

Horse removal from Kosciuszko National Park has largely come to a standstill, well before the legislation passed in June 2018.

No removal of horses has taken place in the southern end of the park since April 2016 and from the northern end since August 2017.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2QSguZC>

FACT CHECK 4

Barilaro’s plan will address animal welfare

John Barilaro claims to be concerned about horse welfare. In the NSW Parliament on the 5 May 2016 he said:

“This week, with the release of the draft wild horse management plan, we begin a new campaign to make sure that we look at horse numbers and innovative ways of humanely managing those horses in parks.”

REALITY CHECK

But horses will suffer in Kosciuszko National Park under the new horse protection act and its horse management plan.

With no natural predators, horse numbers in the wild increase each year. Trapping for rehoming has failed to keep pace with breeding. Ultimately this leads to overpopulation, where food becomes limited and horses and native wildlife starve to death. Extreme conditions such as drought and bushfires exacerbate suffering and death. Clearly this is not a humane outcome.

CORROBOREE FROG

The corroboree frog is listed as critically endangered, one step away from extinct in the wild.

Threats include the amphibian chytrid fungus, habitat degradation, feral animals and weeds. Feral horses, pigs and deer have been observed damaging corroboree frog habitat.



ENDANGERED

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

EXTINCT IN THE WILD

Photo: Andrew C | CC BY-SA 3.0

Various control methods, including ground and aerial shooting, have been found to have good animal welfare scores compared to other methods, including trapping and rehoming.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2HcZyvC>

FACT CHECK 5

Aerial culling is inhumane

In 2015 Mr Barilaro said in NSW Parliament:

"I cannot accept that anyone who calls himself a conservationist would condone an aerial culling program. If numbers of wild horses are a problem in the Kosciuszko National Park, there are kinder ways to control the wild horse population."

REALITY CHECK

The RSPCA and independent reports show that aerial culling is an acceptable and humane way to manage horse numbers.

Aerial shooting, when carried out correctly, was rated by animal welfare experts as the same or better welfare outcome than all the other control techniques available, including mustering, trapping and rehoming and ground shooting.

Without the use of aerial or ground shooting, park managers have been unable to stabilise or reduce the horse population, regardless of the other methods used.

A range of techniques must be available to reduce horse populations, including ground and aerial shooting, depending on the situation.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2HcZyvC> and <https://bit.ly/2Df5qC3>

FACT CHECK 6

The Guy Fawkes aerial cull was inhumane

Mr Barilaro perpetuates common misconceptions regarding the Guy Fawkes aerial culling of feral horses that took place in 2000 as a key rationale for why no forms of lethal control should be used and the 2016 draft management plan abandoned:

"There is plenty of evidence of a number of horses that went through painful deaths...a day after the slaughter had ceased, horses were found still alive and dying an agonising and painful death."

REALITY CHECK

The Guy Fawkes aerial cull of 606 horses was not inhumane. While one horse was found not to have died immediately, this was an isolated incident that could have been avoided.

An independent review by Dr English, from the Veterinary School at University of Sydney surveyed the aftermath of the Guy Fawkes aerial cull. In his report, after randomly reviewing more than 100 of the shot horses, it was determined that only one horse was not killed quickly (which was shot correctly but the bullet behaved 'bizarrely'), while the other 605 are likely to have experienced humane deaths.

Dr English concluded that there was "no evidence to support a claim that the horses had not been killed humanely, and no evidence of indiscriminate targeting away from the killing zone".

More info: <https://bit.ly/2CnpGjk>

FACT CHECK 7

The Wild Horse Heritage Act bans lethal horse control

John Barilaro spoke to Parliament on 23 May 2018 when introducing the Bill:

"This bill will end the uncertainty as to whether brumbies will be shot: They will not be shot."

REALITY CHECK

The Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act is silent about how horses are to be controlled. This act only explains how the 'heritage value' of horse populations in the park is to be protected. The horse plan, which is yet to be prepared, will specify the control methods to be used. The horse plan must be approved by the Minister for the Environment.

Animal cruelty legislation ensures any control method is humane. Within this constraint, the environment minister retains the ability to decide which control methods are used by the NSW parks service. This is unchanged by the new horse protection law.

John Barilaro, by leading the public announcements on the legislation and the content of the plan, has effectively dictated to the Minister for the Environment the control methods that can and can't be used.

Despite the new law's flexibility, it still must be repealed to prevent feral horses protection and to re-establish the primacy of the national parks act.

More info: <https://bit.ly/2AsQTRs>

ABOUT RECLAIM KOSCI

In June 2018 the NSW government turned Australia into a global laughing stock when it passed legislation protecting destructive feral horses in Kosciuszko National Park, locking in ongoing degradation of sensitive wetlands and alpine areas.

Overturning the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act – which should be called the Kosciuszko Destruction Act – is essential for protecting our fragile alpine region.

Reclaim Kosci is aimed at achieving just that, as well as major reductions in horse numbers to ensure Kosciuszko National Park's restoration.

Reclaim Kosci is led by the Invasive Species Council and supported by the National Parks Association of the ACT, National Parks Association of NSW, Colong Foundation for Wilderness and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW.

