Wild horses are a symbol of the American West. And while they are protected by law, the agency charged with protecting them seems to have forgotten that their wildness is what makes them so precious.

There are about 33,000 wild horses on the open range. To control the herds and keep land open for cattle grazing, the federal Bureau of Land Management has rounded up many more horses and tried to put them out for adoption. But adoptions are not keeping up, and some 30,000 horses remain in holding pens. Until the past few days, the bureau had been planning to cull another 6,000 horses from the wild by killing them.

Fortunately, the bureau has halted that rush to euthanasia after Madeleine Pickens — the wife of T. Boone Pickens, the oil tycoon — offered to create a one-million-acre refuge for the wild horses already in captivity. Mrs. Pickens plans to sterilize the horses on her land and says she will take any additional horses the federal government wants to cull from the wild herd.

Sterilization is the best solution for long-term wild horse management. The federal Bureau of Land Management is finally coming to understand that and is now working with the Humane Society on very promising contraception studies in two herds. The bureau also needs to consider buying back some of its range permits from cattle ranchers. We suspect that in this economic climate, some ranchers would be glad to part with them. The bureau then could leave wild horses on the range — instead of capturing them and paying to feed them — until aggressive contraception comes into play.

We wish Mrs. Pickens the best with her plan for a wild-horse refuge and hope it moves forward quickly. It would empty the federal government’s corrals and restore a significant measure of freedom to animals that are an emblem of freedom.