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Activists are crying foul, saying the government's census numbers on the horses are inaccurate. They argue the horses are not overpopulated or starving, and the roundups hurt the horses. They want the horses to remain wild.

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Many activists claim the government is doing this to benefit cattle ranchers who are a powerful lobbying group. "They are zeroing out too many of the legal herds," said Craig Downer, a wild horse advocate. "Their so-called appropriate management levels that have been set are not viable in the long term, so they're setting up these horses to a crippling low number that's not adaptable."

The day before the scheduled media tour, the scene was quiet at Bruno's Country Club, the little saloon, motel and restaurant that has become the unofficial headquarters of the BLM. The sun was just starting to set and Bruno's was glowing under the purple clouds

Seemingly out of nowhere, a man in a tuxedo and a horse-head mask bicycled by the dusty parking lot. One of the local rangers didn't even blink at the sight, saying he's probably a "burner."

"Burners" are a group of eccentric people who live in Gerlach year round and organize the annual festival.

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