

Wild horse advocates decry planned use of helicopters

Feds plan massive wild horse roundup in Wyoming

By JEFF GEARINO - Southwest Wyoming bureau | Posted: Monday, July 26, 2010



Wild horses congregate last month near the Adobe Town Rim in southwestern Wyoming. The Bureau of Land Management plans to round up nearly 2,000 wild horses this fall in the Adobe Town and Salt Wells Creek herd management areas. (Ken Driese/Star-Tribune correspondent)

GREEN RIVER -- Federal land managers plan to gather nearly 2,000 wild horses in a massive roundup in southwest Wyoming this fall, according to Bureau of Land Management officials.

BLM officials released their environmental assessment Thursday on the proposal to gather excess wild horses from the Adobe Town and Salt Wells Creek herd management areas.

The agency plans to use a combination of helicopter roundups and fertility control methods to reduce wild horse numbers in the adjacent herd management areas.

Wild horse advocates criticized the planned roundup, particularly the use of helicopters in light of a recent emergency roundup in Nevada in which 21 horses died. Advocates said the horses can be traumatized, injured or killed.

"I don't care how gentle and kind the helicopter pilot is ... it still scares the heck out of those poor horses in a huge roundup like this," said Patricia Fazio, statewide coordinator for the Cody-based Wyoming Wild Horse Coalition.

"We've always had concerns about helicopter roundups ... we think it's very traumatic for the animals and when they get into the corrals, they will sometimes harm themselves."

Fazio said there are newer, better and less-traumatizing methods of capturing wild horses than the use of helicopters.

"They do have a new methodology now called bait trapping ... where they use a mineral salt combination as bait and temporary panels to set up corrals," she said. "They bait them and the animals walk right in ... and so there's no helicopter use at all."

The horses taken from the range would be placed for adoption or sent to long-term holding corrals.

The gather will start Oct. 1 and is expected to conclude Nov. 8.

The two herd management areas are located in southeastern Sweetwater County, south of Wamsutter and Interstate 80.

BLM officials said both herd units are way over the appropriate management level.

Agency officials said population surveys conducted in July 2009 revealed approximately 1,950 horses living within the herd units.

The appropriate management level range for the Adobe Town area is between 610 to 800 wild horses. The range for the Salt Wells Creek area is 251 to 365.

"Our goal is to manage for healthy public lands and healthy wild horses," BLM High District Office manager John Ruhs said in a media release. "We made the decision to conduct this gather after extensive public input and review of the best scientific information available to us."

The environmental assessment said the estimated wild horse population in the complex is approximately 2,438, or more than 1,500 above the low management range for the two herd units.

Up for adoption

The agency plans to round up 1,950 wild horses and treat and release 100 mares with fertility-control vaccines. The assessment said that should remove 1,580 excess horses from the herd management areas.

Ruhs said that will leave a total of 861 wild horses in the area, which is within the appropriate management level for the herd complex.

All animals gathered will be examined and treated if needed by a veterinarian, according to plans.

Ruhs said the 1,580 wild horses will be put up for adoption.

The roundups are part of a larger agency effort to remove thousands of wild horses from public rangelands around the West and in Wyoming.

An estimated 35,000 wild horses live on ranges in 10 Western states, according to federal figures.

BLM officials contend wild horses have no natural predators and with an annual reproduction rate of between 15 and 20 percent, the excess animals must be periodically removed from public rangelands to meet population objectives.

The agency estimates there are more than 5,000 wild horses scattered across 16 herd management units in the state, with most of the state's wild horse populations located in the southwest.

The BLM has set a statewide wild horse objective of 2,700 to 3,700.

In 2003 -- after wild horse populations soared to nearly 7,000 in Wyoming -- the state and BLM signed a "consent decree" dictating that the agency meet the state's wild horse population objective with roundups over the next few years.

Under the decree, when data is gathered that indicates a herd management area is over its population objective, the BLM has one year from discovery to remove the animals to the low range of the management area.

Tragic roundup

Fazio pointed to the agency's most recent roundup in the West as an example of the hazards of using helicopters in gathering operations.

BLM wranglers gathered more than 600 wild horses in northeastern Nevada earlier this month in a controversial emergency roundup, which federal land managers said was necessary to prevent the animals from dying of thirst.

The agency said 636 wild horses were rounded up in northern Elko County, but 21 died.

BLM officials said 13 died of dehydration, five from pre-existing injuries or deformities, and three were put down after being injured in temporary holding corrals.

Wild horse advocates went to court to try and halt the roundup, claiming it was inhumane to herd the horses by helicopter to trap sites in the summer heat.

But a federal judge allowed the roundups to proceed after BLM officials said hundreds of horses could die on the range because water sources were drying up.

The BLM has conducted several roundups in the Adobe Town and Salt Wells Creek areas over the past decade.

Wild horses were last removed from the herd units in January 2007.

Federal cowboys were able to round up about 918 wild horses (844 horses were removed) before bad weather shut down operations. A followup roundup in August 2007 removed another 171 horses from the herd units.

Horses captured during roundups in Wyoming are taken to the BLM's holding facility in Rock Springs.

The agency also has agreements with the Wyoming Honor Farm in Riverton, a state correctional facility where wild horses are trained by residents, and with the Mantle Ranch near Wheatland, where horses are also gentled and trained.

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