

Gather Numbers in Summer/Fall 2006

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## **AREA BLM IS GATHERING 1,700 WILD HORSES**

### **LAST WILD HORSE GATHERING WILL BE ON FOREST SERVICE LAND...**

**BY DENNIS SMITH-Publisher**

It's not just city slickers who get a lump in their throat at the sight of wild horses spotted from a lonely highway on a nearby hill. Even cattle ranchers and government range land specialists admit that wild horses, who are also their constant problem, are an inspiring sight to see in the big open country of Northeast California-Northwest Nevada.

After this year however there will be fewer wild horses out there on public range in these parts as Bureau of Land Management contract personnel stay busy rounding up 1,700 head of wild horses and a handful of wild burros before the snow flies.

The BLM completed this year's biggest horse round-up several weeks ago. That took place on the Twin Peaks Area that straddles the California-Nevada border north of Susanville. About 1,000 horses were removed from an 800,000 acre area, a big chunk of the land BLM manages out of the Susanville Area office. That sounds like a lot of horses but it's only a good dent in the size of the wild horse population here.

Before the gathering an aerial survey estimated 1,700 wild horses on the Twin Peaks Area. The designated management level for this area is 448 to 748. After the gathering there are 700 head left, which is at the upper limit. This means the BLM will need to gather here again in the next couple of years. By 2008 the herd will be back up to an estimated 1,070 head.

With ideal weather, BLM contract cowboys worked in unison with helicopter pilot Rick Harmon who located the bands of horses and drove them toward the trap before rushing to the gate. Often they employed what they call a "guide" horse, one specially trained to jump in front of the wild band and lead the group into the trap. Sometimes a stallion or some wise old mares will sense there's a trap and break and run. In these cases the cowboys ride out on horseback and try to throw a couple of ropes on these escapees.

All 1,000 head taken off the Twin Peaks have been shipped to a large BLM wild horse facility at Fallon, Nevada. There the horses are vaccinated, health evaluated, divided into groups according to age and sex, and then further evaluated to find the best candidates to go into the government adoption program. About half the horses, the very best ones, will end up being selected for adoption. They are well built, age five and under and attractive. The public especially likes horses with a little color. The older horses are poorer prospects for adoption because they are harder to gentle and train. They may also be the lucky ones. They will be shipped to contract ranches in Kansas and Oklahoma where they will spend the rest of their lives with good feed and room to roam. Putting these horses out to pasture costs the government \$500 each year.

The week of August 14, BLM contract crews also caught 77 head of horses near the Oregon/California Border. These are horses believed to have come off U.S. Forest Service land, a part of what is called the Three Sisters Herd. They were gathered at Mt. Dome in Modoc County. Under an agreement between BLM and the U.S. Forest Service, BLM gathers and cares for USFS horses, but also receives compensation from the Forest.

About September 10th the gathering operation shifts to the High Rock and Wall Canyon herd management areas in remote northwest Nevada, east of Cedarville, CA. Plans are to capture about 465 wild horses (402 from High Rock and 63 from Wall Canyon). BLM's management level at High Rock ranges from 78 to 120 horses and from 15 to 25 wild horses at Wall Canyon. Of those captured about 25 of the best quality mares will be held at Litchfield for 30 plus days and will be given two birth control shots, 30 days apart, then they will be returned to the area they came from. The abbreviated name for the birth control is PZP and it inhibits conception in these mare over a three year period. The shots are totally effective the first year, pretty effective the second year and only about 50 percent effective the third year. Steve Surian, Range Land Management Specialist for the Surprise Office, says the birth control program is successful enough in reducing herd numbers enough to extend the time between needed gatherings from two years to three years. High quality mares are selected and retained because while conception is delayed a year or longer, eventually they will have foals and the better quality the horses are, the better the chances are their foals will be adoptable when the time comes. An equal number of better quality stallions (about 25) will also be turned back. The

BLM attempt to keep the same balance of mares to stallions that occurs naturally that being about 50/50.

Even though about 50 head of those gathered will be returned to High Rock and Wall Canyon, that still leaves about 400 that will be permanently removed. Pre-gathering aerial counts will determine actual gather numbers. Of the horses gathered at High Rock and Wall Canyon, some will go to Fallon and some will go to the facility at Litchfield.

The last big Wild Horse round-up of the year takes place on land of the Modoc National Forest on Devils Garden and is scheduled to begin October 23, the day after deer season ends. Modoc National Forest will remove an estimated 160 head of horses from the Devils Garden. The population there is currently estimated at 450 to 500 head. Management levels call for a herd of 285 to 315 horses. BLM contract crews will be removing these horses with the help of Forest employees. The animals will go to Litchfield. The late October date after deer hunters are gone is considered an ideal time to gather on the Devils Garden if the weather holds.

Information about adopting these or other wild horses can be obtained by calling the BLM Eagle Lake field office in Susanville at 530-257-0456.