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Horse sanctuary feels drought

By John Askew, Journal staff

HOT SPRINGS — If there is one person who knows what it's like to suffer from a drought, it's Dayton Hyde, head of the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary for the last 20 years.



Steve McEnroe/Journal staff Horses of the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary graze in a pasture on a high plateau above the Cheyenne River. Ongoing drought could require the sanctuary, and other ranchers in the region, to buy tons of hay to feed their livestock this winter.

The sanctuary is a nonprofit organization that has about 500 wild horses roaming 11,000 acres of pristine land south of Hot Springs. But with the drought in its seventh year, managing the ranch — and particularly, feeding the horses — is becoming increasingly difficult.

“We’ve been feeding hay to a certain amount of horses, and it’s costly,” Hyde said.

According to the National Weather Service, the Hot Springs area has received only 6.2 inches of rainfall so far this year. Compare that to the 9.5-inch average for the same period, and it’s easy to understand the agricultural impact of the drought. One effect is overgrazing that damages the grass.

“Ranchers hate to abuse their land but sometimes it has to happen.”

Thankfully, Hyde said, a burst of spring rain allowed the grass to grow early on before the summer heat prevented it.

“You can have a dry year, but if you get a little rain at the right time, it will turn out all right,” Hyde said.

“And this year is going to be difficult, but all right.”

To help pay the cost of feeding each horse 20-30 pounds a day, the sanctuary receives donations of hay and even farms 60 acres of alfalfa that yields three to four harvests a year.

Interestingly, Hyde doesn't rely on irrigation water from the Angostura Reservoir like most farmers the area. Instead, he uses private wells on his property.

"It's great when we get donations of hay, but the drawback is having to haul it here," he said.

Hyde said it costs about \$250,000 to operate the ranch annually, and most of that is used for fuel.

"A lot of farmers in the state have some great hay crop this year, but the cost of transporting it is tremendous," Hyde said.

The price for a ton of hay, usually about \$45 to \$50, is now between \$130 and \$150.

Apart from overgrazing, another issue the sanctuary faces is the threat of wildfires, but one benefit to having horses constantly grazing the land is the degree of fire prevention it provides.

Hyde considers himself extremely fortunate that the recent 10,000-acre Alabaugh Fire didn't spread to the horse sanctuary.

"The fire came right up to one corner of the ranch, but because of grazing, the accumulation of the grasses was gone, and the fire didn't spread," Hyde said.

For now, Hyde remains optimistic about the next few years.

"I think that it's a little late for rain at this point, but hopefully we'll get a wet fall," Hyde said. "You just can't predict what this country will be like."