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I-Team: Nevada's Wild Horses Face Desperate Future

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The Bureau of Land Management spends millions of dollars each year to round up wild horses and burros, and then millions more to house and feed them inside government pens.

In Nevada, thousands of additional horses are slated for roundups in the next few months. Wild horse advocates question whether the BLM has any justification for corralling the animals in the first place.

On average, the BLM gathers around 9,500 horses per year, more than half of them in Nevada.

Wild horse advocates acknowledge that sometimes such roundups are necessary, but they also argue that with 40 million Nevada acres under BLM control, there should be room for a few thousand horses.

[Read Part 1: No Straight Answers From Nevada's Top Wild Horse Official](#)

So how does BLM justify the roundups? Usually by claiming the horses are a threat to the health of the range. The question is -- can they prove it?

Rounding up wild horses carries inherent risks for the animals; so presumably, there should be a good reason for capturing them. In early September, a BLM roundup captured 990 horses in Nevada's Jackson Mountain wilderness area, supposedly because there wasn't enough forage to support them. [When the horses got to the Palomino Valley holding facility](#), they started dying because of the feed they received. There were 129 horses already dead when the *I-Team* interviewed BLM-Nevada's Susie Stokke, who summed it up this way.

Stokke said, "The facility has supplied the supportive care and the best veterinary care these horses could possibly experience."

Great care, except the horses kept dying. When the death toll surpassed 150, BLM issued a strange statement, boasting that "the number of deaths each day has decreased dramatically."

What bothers wild horse advocates the most is that while the BLM felt there was only room for 200 or fewer horses in the 280,000-acre Jackson Range, they said it was still okay to have 8,000 cattle and sheep grazing in the same area. Horses bad. Cattle good. The same conflict has played out all over the west.

Craig Downer said, "How can you say the several thousand horses that remain in all the west, compare with several million livestock? It's just ludicrous."

Downer is a scientist who grew up watching wild horses near his Northern Nevada home. Most of those herds are gone now. Downer worked as a field scientist for the BLM but quit in disgust because he feels the information used to justify most of the roundups is bogus.

"It's very skewed data, very arbitrary statements. They'll just come out and say that wild horses are a detriment to the ecosystem without any proofs," he continued.

That allegation has been leveled by national BLM scientists as well, who accuse higher ups of politicizing range science to benefit ranchers, miners, and oil companies on public lands.

Jerry Reynoldson said, "What I really think is there's no science."

[Wild horse advocates like Reynoldson](#) have long argued that BLM Nevada basically makes it up as it goes along. The agency will allege a range is in bad shape and blame it on horses instead of cattle or people. In the recent Spring Mountain roundup, BLM rounded up hundreds of animals, not because they are starving or thirsty now, but because they might be in the future, based on BLM formulas.

"Certainly we see instances where they don't even dispute the fact the range isn't in bad condition, but a number that was set arbitrarily ten years ago that provides authority to gather. It has little to do with range conditions and a lot to do with we just want to get them out of here," Jerry Reynoldson stated.

When BLM allows water to be diverted or fences to be built -- cutting off the horses -- the predictions of doom become self-fulfilling. In the late '90s, BLM removed most of the horses from Red Rock Canyon in order to restore native grasses, it said. An overabundance of grass later led to fires that scorched 30,000 acres. And while wild horses were deemed a threat, BLM allowed private stables to operate in Red Rock.

Craig Downer said, "They always come up with their pseudo justifications. They name many negative things, but in many cases, they're just scapegoating for abuses that people have caused."

Budget figures obtained by the *I-Team* show that under Susie Stokke, BLM Nevada has put millions of dollars into roundups but very little into adopting out the animals. That in turn costs taxpayers millions more just to feed the horses and burros. Nevada has more horses but a lower adoption rate than any other state. Stokke sees that as a plus.

"If you look at what Nevada is accomplishing and compare that to other states, we're doing everything we can," Stokke stated.

As recently as 1999, Las Vegans could drive out to Red Rock Canyon and have a good chance of seeing wild horses. When BLM removed most of them, it told the public it would one day return some horses to the canyon. Eight years later, we're still waiting.

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