

LAS VEGAS REVIEW JOURNAL- ARTICLE 3
Sunday, July 10, 2005
Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

WILD HORSES: BLM keeps herd in check
Roundup focuses on young, old animals so that those between can thrive

CLARIFICATION -- 07/12/05 -- A headline on Sunday's story about the wild horse roundup near Eureka inaccurately described the interval between such events. The Bureau of Land Management conducts roundups most of the year. Individual herds are reduced about every four years.

By ANDREW STRICKLER
REVIEW-JOURNAL

NEAR EUREKA

The band of horses came into view around a small hill, followed closely by a low-flying helicopter that herded the animals toward a wide funnel of camouflage netting.

The horses, galloping in a tight group, passed through the gate of a small enclosure, which quickly was slammed shut.

The band of horses, consisting of six adult chestnuts and roans with two colts, snorted and circled the pen as a single unit, barely winded from the chase. Without landing, the helicopter circled back in search of more horses.

This roundup in a remote area 30 miles southwest of Eureka, the first in Nevada since the March-June foaling season, is part of a three-week effort by the Bureau of Land Management to reduce wild horse populations in Eureka and Nye counties.

Friday's roundup was overseen by BLM wild horse specialist Shawna Richardson, who said all but 60 of an estimated 390 horses in the Seven Mile Herd Management Area would be captured to control an ever-growing horse population.

Richardson says the agency hoped to capture young horses, which are the best candidates for adoption, as well as older animals, whose departure she said would help maintain the overall health of the remaining horses.

"We're looking for a good mix," Richardson said.

"We know that turning out healthy horses now will mean even healthier horses the next time around."

The lower numbers, Richardson said, will give the herd room to grow about 17 percent a year over the next four years, when the next roundup is expected to occur.

Once captured, the horses are trucked to a nearby corral to be segregated and inspected for disease. From there, the horses will be taken to a BLM facility north of Reno, where they will be prepared for adoption through the agency's Adopt a Wild Horse and Burro Program. The program has placed about 200,000 wild horses and burros in private ownership since 1973.

Horses that cannot be adopted out then can be sold for a nominal fee. The sale of wild horses temporarily was suspended earlier this year after it was discovered that 41 horses sold by the BLM were resold to a meat-packing plant and destroyed. The discovery enraged wild horse advocates and forced the BLM to issue new sales contracts that outlined criminal penalties for buyers who resold horses for slaughter.

BLM officials said in June that about 8,400 horses must be sold this year to control an overflowing horse population in federal holding facilities.

Forest Service rangeland manager Tom Seley, who attended Friday's roundup, says wild horses in central Nevada exceed appropriate population limits. Those levels are calculated by the size of the range, available water and food, and the combined pressures of cattle and other livestock, which often share range with wild horses.

"Once you go past that level, you're putting extreme pressure on the vegetation, and it can take years to regain the ecological health of the land," Seley said.

Nevada BLM officials estimate that there are 13,300 wild horses and 1,470 wild burros living in about 100 separate areas around the state. That's about half of the U.S. population of such animals.

Those numbers are significantly lower than the estimate of 19,000 made for fiscal year 2004, when officials say drought contributed to the death of many older horses as well as lower-than-normal birth rates. Despite the decline, BLM officials plan to remove about 1,500 animals in Nevada this year.

Wild horses are a contentious issue in rural Nevada. Many ranchers say the horses eat vegetation and drink scarce water needed by their livestock. The horses' advocates argue that wild horses are the last living symbol of the settlement of the West.

"They're a symbol of freedom, no doubt about it," Seley said.

Richardson agrees that wild horse roundups often bring out festering disagreements over the use of federal land.

"We're between the horse advocates on one side and the anti-horse people on the other," she said.

"If everyone's not mad at us, we know we're not doing our job."

But Seley says many wild horse advocates overstate the objections of ranchers lobbying for reduced horse populations.

"It's not that they don't want wild horses," he said.

"The problem is the number of wild horses and the perceived lack of management of those horses."

Some also argue that wild horses, in addition to their destruction of vegetation, often are malnourished and diseased, an issue that was not in evidence on Friday.

Wild horse wrangler Greg Cook, who runs one of only two companies contracted to gather wild horses on federal land, said the horses gathered in central Nevada last week appeared healthy, alert and well fed.

"I don't know anyone who would expect these horses to look any better," he said.

But Seley, who has overseen wild horses in Nevada for both the BLM and Forest Service since 1987, says he does not expect the condition of these horses to change anyone's mind about the animals.

"Arguing about wild horses is like talking to people about abortion or gun control," he said.

"It's a deep, emotional issue, a personal conviction."