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Drought prompts roundup
Wild horses suffer malnourishment

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Too weak to endure a trailer ride to California, a band of wild horses from the Muddy Mountains meandered in a corral Thursday at Red Rock Canyon, their protruding ribs a testament to the drought that has left Southern Nevada tinder dry and thin on vegetation.

"These horses are in bad shape," said Bureau of Land Management wild horse specialist Gary McFadden. "They're docile, but they only appear to be docile because they're weak."

The bays and sorrels taken from National Park Service land near Lake Mead's Echo Bay are among 69 wild horses and burros that have been removed from public lands in an emergency roundup prompted by the prolonged dry spell.

Those 5 years old and younger will be trucked to an adoption distribution center at Ridgecrest, Calif., where they will be inspected by veterinarians, inoculated, wormed and branded. The older horses that are in poor condition and not vital to maintaining the wild herd's genetics will be shipped to long-term holding facilities in Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma.

All that have been captured from the Muddy Mountains, the Spring Mountains and public land outside Pahrump and some 200 that a helicopter and cowboys will start rounding up today from Cold Creek will be fed and watered by volunteers from the National Wild Horse Association.

The animals will not be transported until they recover from thirst and starvation caused by the bleak range conditions.

"It's by far the worst I've ever seen," said McFadden, who has spent a decade working the ranges outside the Las Vegas Valley.

"We haven't had enough moisture in the last two years that would generate plant growth," he said.

That is why government cowboys have begun rounding up what will total more than 300 wild horses and burros, many of them struggling to survive.

Until a drizzle on March 24 dampened the Mojave Desert with 0.1 inch of precipitation, Las Vegas had gone 99 days without measurable precipitation, a pace to break the record dry spell of 150 days set in 1959.

Since March 25, another 96 days have passed without rainfall, making the valley 2.19 inches shy of its annual average for this time of year.

What is worse, in the 409 days that have elapsed since May 15, 2001, the National Weather Service has measured only 0.77 inches of rain at the official McCarran airport station, far short of the more than 4 inches that normally falls there in a year.

Laurie Howard, vice president of the National Wild Horse Association, said she does not want to see the drought leaving wild horses, the symbolic spirit of the West, dead on the desert. But the association is adamant about leaving enough horses to maintain viable herds on BLM lands in and around Red Rock Canyon and on U.S. Forest Service lands near Cold Creek and the Spring Mountains.

Also, she said she wonders about several hundred elk around Cold Creek that compete for the same food and water as the horses.

The Cold Creek wild horse herd appears to be in good shape at the higher elevations, Howard said. But if elk continue to share the range, she is concerned that the fate of the horses will be the same as those from the Muddy Mountains.

Howard said the association is seeking volunteers to help with caring for the captured horses. A meeting to recruit volunteers, who must become association members, is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. July 8 at the BLM offices, 4701 N. Torrey Pines Drive.
