

Letter from Mark C. Jorgensen Coyote Canyon
Mark C. Jorgensen
Superintendent
Anza-Borrego Desert State Park
200 Palm Canyon Drive
Borrego Springs, CA 92004
760 767-4399

Mr. Charles Horst, Chairman
California Equestrian Trails and Lands Coalition
36281 Lodge Road
Tollhouse, Ca 93667

Mr. Horst:

April 15, 2003

California State Parks Director Ruth Coleman has asked me to respond to your recent letter regarding the rescue of feral horses from Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. I will attempt to answer as many of your concerns as possible, and attached you will find the background material used to evaluate the health status of the feral horses prior to their being moved to a wild horse sanctuary.

California State Parks contracted with the Wildlife Health Center of the University of California, Davis in 2002 to perform a field study of the feral horses of Coyote Canyon. The Doctoral Thesis study was investigating the relationship of the feral horses with the Coyote Canyon environment. Specifically, the study centered on horse interactions and possible impacts with the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep, the water quality of Coyote Creek, the fragile riparian community along the creek, as well as possible horse impacts on cultural sites associated with native Cahuilla Indian village sites. The photographs of the feral horses taken by the study team during the summer of 2002 were quite graphic and showed the impacts of the worst drought recorded in the 150 years of weather records for the region. About two-thirds of the horses recorded showed ribs and bony hips and shoulders. This was the poorest these horses have looked in thirty years. In late summer 2002, the study team recorded a minimum of thirty-four individual horses. At the time of rescue, only twenty-nine could be accounted for. It is assumed the missing five horses succumbed to the severe drought situation.

The poor health status of the feral horses alarmed the study team and caused the park staff and UC Davis study team to call in equine experts to evaluate the situation. Two equine veterinarians, Dr. Joe Cannon from Bonsall, California, and Dr. Greg Ferraro, Director of the Center for Equine Health at UC Davis, were joined by Joan Embery, former ambassador to the San Diego Zoo, and a local equestrian, Gail Gregson to spend a day in Coyote Canyon viewing the horses from the ground and by helicopter. The four equine experts offered their independent opinions to the staff, and an overview of their letters is attached in this packet for your consideration. As you will see in reading the opinions, their consensus is unequivocal in determining the horses were overall in poor health, that it would be inhumane to keep them in the canyon, and that the canyon's habitat was unsuitable for the horse's long-term health. The four consultants recommended that the horses be rescued only after being fed or after taking advantage of the spring

green-up, which was underway. It was felt the horses needed additional weight before they could be safely captured. The horses responded well enough that all were captured without incident.

As you are well aware, the emergency situation pertaining to feral and wild horses and burros due to severe drought is of concern throughout the western states. Literally thousands of wild horses and burros have been gathered on an emergency basis by the Bureau of Land Management and their contractors in the last two years. Recently about 1,000 horses were brought in from Nevada and over 800 were gathered from northwest Colorado after they left poor forage conditions in southwest Wyoming. The situation in Anza-Borrego has been reflected in many western states, with experts predicting severe impacts on rangelands and wintering areas over widespread regions.

Several BLM horse authorities were contacted by park staff and our cooperators at UC Davis prior to the rescue of the feral horses. We attempted to obtain the services of Dr. Al Kane, DVM and Mr. Ron Hall of the BLM to have them visit Coyote Canyon. Neither was allowed by their agency to travel to Anza-Borrego to assist. We contacted Mr. Tom Pogagnik of the California Office of BLM to enlist his advice on obtaining the best capture team available. He recommended Cattoor Livestock Roundup, Inc., which performs two-thirds of all BLM horse gathers in the western states. Mr. Dave Cattoor came to Anza-Borrego to assess the conditions and logistics of rescuing the feral animals in early March and we ultimately did contract with Cattoor.

As you will see in the attached packet of information, California State Parks and UC Davis put out press releases regarding the plight of the Coyote Canyon horses prior to the capture, while Parks continued to work on solutions. **A suggested feeding program in the state park and wilderness areas was not acceptable. As these animals are feral, deriving from stock which had been neglected many years ago, they are not considered native to the park ecosystem. As you know, these horses resided within Critical Habitat of the Endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep and spent much of their time in the creek and the adjacent riparian zones, especially during the current extreme drought conditions.** Although many people feel the drought has subsided, the record shows rainfall at less than half the average, with 3.1" recorded thus far. It is clear the drought is still in full effect, and the prospect for the horses which lived in Coyote Canyon would have been very bleak, had they been left to fend for themselves. A feeding program would have only prolonged the horse's hardship and continued to take a heavy toll on the range. I have included records of each horse's Coggins Test in the attachments which, as you pointed out, was mandatory before the horses could be transported out of state. This project was closely monitored and guided by some of the best equine veterinarians available. Each horse was evaluated, vaccinated with 5-way vaccine, given their first round of West Nile Virus vaccine, and tested for Infectious Equine Anemia (Coggins).

You have questioned the intent of California State Parks as to the long-term care of these horses. One of the primary factors for seeking reputable horse sanctuaries, was in fact the long-term commitment to these horses. To have put them up for adoption would have been to send them out to twenty-nine different locations, not knowing the future of any of them. I agree with Park staff and the UC Davis staff which made the decision to seek a wild horse sanctuary where these animals could spend a quality life for the rest of their days. **The nineteen mares, foals, and yearlings now owned by the**

Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary in South Dakota are reported to be doing quite well. The sanctuary has been in operation for almost twenty years and is run by Mr. Dayton Hyde, an author of fifteen books on horses and western ranching. All horses arrived safely, with no injuries, births, or loss of foals. The weather there has warmed considerably and the horses have adjusted nicely. I spoke with the sanctuary staff just yesterday to get an update on the horses. The horses will be given their second round of West Nile Virus vaccine and will find their new 11,000 acre home to be excellent horse country.

The ten stallions are being held in Utah on a ranch awaiting gelding and final transport to their new sanctuary. We have consulted with the BLM on their policy relating to stallions. BLM gelds all studs two or more years of age, and generally finds any gelding over five years to not be adoptable. I continue to support the future disposition of these animals to be a wild horse sanctuary which will accept geldings. The Black Hills sanctuary does not accept studs or geldings. We have a sanctuary in the Owens Valley willing to accept these ten animals once they are gelded.

On the issue of compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), state park staff thoroughly researched this subject prior to any action on the feral horses. Our Department CEQA experts and legal counsel evaluated the emergency rescue situation. **As I am sure you are aware, in cases where an emergency situation is being mitigated, the normal CEQA review process does not apply. To have waited for a forty five day public review period would have put these animals right into the heat of summer as well as the peak of their foaling season.**

The Colorado Desert District and Anza-Borrego Desert State Park staff considered the opinions of equestrian interests prior to the horse rescue operation. The opinions of the four equine experts weighed heavily on our decision to do what was right for the feral horses, in light of their poor health condition in this severe drought. Several of our local staff are equestrians, including the District Superintendent, the Coyote Canyon patrol ranger, and me, the Park Superintendent. We are not only park professionals, but horse enthusiasts as well.

Please take time to review the enclosures I have put together for your consideration. I hope you will agree we took this rescue operation on with forethought and with the utmost consideration for **the feral horses**. We realize the removal of horses from the backcountry is an emotional issue. We know the horses at the Black Hills sanctuary are doing very well and have adjusted to their journey. They are in horse country now and **have a long healthy future before them. We would like to proceed with the stallions to get them onto a sanctuary and ensure their future as well.**

Thank you for your inquiry and comments. I hope this information gives you a more complete view of our rescue operation and our concern for the **feral** horse's future.

Sincerely,

Mark C. Jorgensen
Superintendent
Anza-Borrego Desert State Park