

Wild horses displaced by Idaho rangeland fire

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BOISE, Idaho — Wild horses won't return to the nearly 300 square miles burned by this summer's Clover Fire until the spring of 2006, a Bureau of Land Management spokeswoman said, and it will cost nearly \$8 million to repair the scorched southern Idaho rangeland.

About 350 wild horses were displaced by the July fire.

Though the animals escaped the flames — which at one point ripped across the range at 500 acres an hour — they were in danger of starving because all but a few small islands of forage were burned, BLM spokeswoman Sky Buffat said Wednesday. BLM officials rounded up the animals, culling 87 from the herd for adoption and sending the rest to holding facilities in Utah. The older animals will remain in the facilities, Buffat said, while 100 of the wild horses will be returned to the rangeland next spring, once enough forage is restored to support them.

"We did what had to be done to essentially rescue this herd. Their health was certainly in danger," Buffat said.

But Andrea Lococo, a wildlife consultant for the Animal Welfare Institute in Washington, D.C., said she feared that returning less than one-third of the herd to the rangeland would make the herd's genetic pool dangerously shallow. Nationwide, Lococo said, the number of wild horses has declined from as many as 55,000 to fewer than 30,000 in the past five years, partly because of BLM adoptions and sales.