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Roundup in the Great Divide

By CAT URBIGKIT

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ROCK SPRINGS -- If all goes well, nearly 500 wild horses will be rounded up and removed from the range east of here, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

A contract crew has been working to round up the excess horses, which are run into a trap, sorted into pens, loaded into tractor-trailers, and trucked 40 miles to the BLM horse corrals at Rock Springs, where they will later be available for adoption.

The wild horses are being removed from the Great Divide Basin herd management area, a huge expanse of checkerboard land ownership north of Interstate 80, where the federal agency has determined the appropriate management level is 415 to 600 horses. With the current population estimate of more than 1,000, the herd is nearly double the level prescribed by land managers, so excess horses must be removed to achieve ecological balance, they say.

An environmental assessment for the horse removal plan noted that the population has exceeded the range capacity to sustain wild horse use over the long term. About 400 horses were removed last year, but the population continues to grow.

The entire southern section of the Great Divide Basin area is checkerboard, with every other square mile section being private property, the majority of which is held by the Rock Springs Grazing Association. Cattle and domestic sheep are grazed in the area.

According to BLM Wild Horse and Burro Specialist Jay D'Ewart, "If we didn't have the cooperation of the livestock people, we wouldn't have a horse herd management area."

With all aspects of the roundup overseen by a BLM specialist, the horses are hazed and driven into a portable trap by a helicopter, with a "Judas" horse leading the animals into the pens. A crew of cowboys is on hand to ride and rope the few horses that evade the maneuvering of the helicopter.

Research on blood samples taken from members of the herd in years past indicates the herd is "primarily derived from American saddle- and ranch-type horses" but with a significant Spanish component.