

BLM wants to remove most horses near Muddy Gap

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LANDER -- Federal wild horse managers plan to remove most of the wild horse population near Whiskey Mountain west and southwest of Muddy Gap this fall.

Roy Packer, range management specialist at the Lander Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management, said the roundup operation would be similar to one completed last year in the Antelope Hills area of the Red Desert.

John Etchepare, director of the Wyoming Department of Agriculture, said management of wild horse herds is simply a matter of protecting the resources of the state. He said the wild horse population got away from the BLM for a variety of reasons, at a time when a multiyear drought was hammering the rangeland.

Early in Gov. Dave Freudenthal's administration, the state sued the BLM, resulting in a mandate to reduce wild horse numbers

Wild horses and burros are descendants of animals released by or escaped from Spanish explorers, ranchers, miners, U.S. Cavalry and American Indians, said Pat Fazio, statewide coordinator of the Wyoming Animal Network.

Nationally, herd numbers have been reduced to about 26,000, Fazio said -- about the same number as existed in 1957 when the Wild Horse Annie bill first brought some protection to the animals. Adoptions of wild horses became required in the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

The BLM's Lander office released an environmental assessment on Sept. 1, noting a preferred alternative which would gather 595 wild horses -- 90 percent of the wild horses in the Green Mountain herd management area -- and return 52 mares and 53 studs back to the wild, after the mares had all received contraceptive injections. About 490 wild horses would be removed and processed through the BLM adoption program.

Together with the uncaptured animals, the returned horses would represent the lower end of the BLM's management level for the wild horses n about 170 head. The upper management range for this area is 300 horses, on the Whiskey Mountain allotment and part of the Green Mountain allotment.

Since 1980, BLM data show that 1,340 horses have been removed from the Green Mountain herd management area. Last year, some 1,300 horses were removed from the state's rangelands.

Horses in this area were last gathered in 2003, leaving a population of 170.

Packer's report attributed the dramatic increase in population since then to an influx of horses from the neighboring Stewart Creek area, and a low population inventory count during drought years, when many horses were hidden in forested areas.

He noted that wild horse herds can increase 18 to 25 percent annually, meaning populations can double about every four to five years. Taking the majority for adoption and providing contraceptive treatment for the rest gives federal managers a few years before the herds need to be culled again, Packer said.

Packer said the fertility control program would provide about two years of contraception to the

treated mares.

"If they're already pregnant, it would not cause an abortion," he said. The injected contraceptives are 94 percent effective the first season and decline in effectiveness to 82 percent the second year and 68 percent the third.

The helicopter-driven roundup could proceed as early as mid-October and would require two weeks to accomplish, Packer said.

Fazio said she has great respect for BLM staff at the district office level, but said higher-ups "have great disdain" for wild horses, viewing them as pests.

"The BLM seriously mismanages the wild horse and burro program," she said.

Last year, Fazio complained, an amendment by U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., got through Congress, which allows once-protected federal wild horses to be sent to slaughter, if an animal is over 10 years of age or fails three adoption attempts.

Andrea Lococo, a consultant for the Animal Welfare Institute, said the BLM seems "hell-bent" on getting rid of as many wild horses as it can, before new legislation can stop the slaughter.

"The roundup EA process is a sham," Lococo said, "given that the decisions to remove horses are made well in advance and the EAs are released only a month before the previously scheduled removals."

Wyoming is home to about 4,100 wild horses in 16 management areas. BLM's objective is between 2,500 and 3,600 animals.