

BLM starting roundup of 2,000 Nevada mustangs

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ELKO - Federal land managers have begun efforts to round up nearly 2,000 wild horses in eastern Nevada as animal welfare groups urge Congress to repeal a new law that could send some of those mustangs to the slaughterhouse.

Bureau of Land Management officials met with contractors Wednesday to finalize plans for the gather of 1,916 horses in the Antelope complex about 60 miles south of Wells and 60 miles north of Ely.

The BLM intends to return about 440 of those horses back to the range and make nearly 1,500 available for adoption.

The gather was expected to begin Thursday or Friday and last for about 60 days, depending on weather conditions, BLM spokesman Mike Brown said Wednesday.

BLM officials will assess the health of the animals and select those to be turned back out to the wild based on desired characteristics for each herd, he said.

All of the mares to be released will be immunized with a contraceptive drug that typically prevents them from reproducing for two years.

Brown said the roundup is drawing increased attention because of a law President Bush signed last week.

The omnibus spending bill includes a provision that allows the BLM to sell horses that are more than 10 years old and horses that have been unsuccessfully offered for adoption three times.

Under the new law, those horses could end up in slaughterhouses overseas.

The Humane Society of the United States and more than 50 other animal welfare organizations are calling on Congress to repeal the new law.

"This means thousands of wild horses will be taken from holding facilities or the range and sent directly to auction, where they are likely to be bought for slaughter by 'killer buyers,'" the Humane Society said in a statement earlier this week.

"Killer buyers purchase and transport the horses to one of three foreign-owned plants in the U.S. that slaughter horses for human consumption in Europe and Asia," the group said.

The Nevada Cattlemen's Association is among the groups that support the measure as a way to reduce what they say is an over population of horses that compete with livestock for food and water.

BLM officials said there currently are about 36,000 wild horses and burros across the West. They say that's at

least 7,000 more than the range can sustain.

Nevada leads the nation in wild horses. Last summer, officials estimated there were 19,000 horses on public land down from a high of 25,000 in 2000. The state's goal is to get the numbers down to 14,500 by the end of 2005.

Bobbi Royle, director of Wild Horse Spirit in the Washoe Valley south of Reno, is among those who advocate a reversal of the law.

"We have to try to prevent the unnecessary slaughter of a large number of animals, Royle told the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Bonnie Matton of Dayton, president of the Wild Horse Preservation League, said she was shocked to learn about the law.

"Many of us who have been working to protect wild horses are stunned by this extreme measure, Matton said.

She said the Bureau of Land Management is making progress on birth-control methods to help keep herds under control and should be encouraged to pursue its adoption program.

Livestock industry representatives and others concerned about the numbers of wild horses on the range are convinced the legislation is reasonable.

"For years, there have been too many wild horses. This is a way to try to deal with the problem, said state Sen. Dean Rhoads, R-Tuscarora.

Rhoads, a rancher who is chairman of the Senate Natural Resources Committee and the Public Lands subcommittee, said too few horses are being adopted.

"Much of the money the BLM receives is used to keep these horses in pasture. And its very expensive to keep doing this, Rhoads said. He said it costs \$1.50 a day to maintain each horse waiting to be adopted.

Richard Thomssen of Dayton said another method to thin the number of wild horses is welcome.

"Id like to see them get down to a reasonable number, Thomssen said. "Ive seen what these horses do to the environment. Theyre very rough on it.

David Nelson of Gardnerville likes the idea of having wild horses in the area but said there could be too many of them.

"If there isnt enough forage for them to survive, the herds need to be thinned. I dont want to see them die of starvation, Nelson said. "But for those that are older, it looks like the new law is a death sentence.

