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Feds mull killing wild horses



Wild horses are fed, watered and held at the Bureau of Land Management's wild horse corrals in Rock Springs in this photo from last November. Too many wild horses in holding facilities is forcing the agency to rethink its wild horse roundup policy. Photo by Jeff Gearino, Star-Tribune file photo.



A wild horse makes dust near Adobe Town in the Red Desert of southwest Wyoming. The Bureau of Land Management is considering drastic policy changes to deal with a growing number of wild horses on the range and in holding facilities. Photo by Ken Driese, Star-Tribune correspondent.

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Euthanizing wild horses and ending roundups are two drastic policy changes being considered to deal with a growing number of wild horses on the range and in holding facilities, a federal official said Monday.

There is an overpopulation of wild horses on public lands, and the Bureau of Land Management can no longer afford to care for the number of mustangs that have been rounded up, said BLM Deputy Director Henri Bisson. The number of horses adopted by the public has dropped off, leaving the BLM with more animals than it can care for, he said.

The combination has the agency facing some tough decisions.

One option would be to stop all roundups -- something the agency said would lead to "ecological disaster."

"The other option is to use some combination of the (adoption program) and euthanasia, which would

be really difficult to do," Bisson told The Associated Press.

"Our goal is supposed to be about healthy horses on healthy ranges. But we are at the point we need to have a conversation with people about pragmatically what can we do given the financial constraints of our program to meet the goals we have," Bisson said at meeting of the BLM's National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board in Reno, Nev.

An estimated 33,000 wild horses live on the range in 10 Western states. The BLM has set a target "appropriate management level" of horses at 27,000.

In Wyoming, there are about 4,500 wild horses scattered across 16 herd management areas in the state, although most of the animals live on public lands and some private lands in southwest Wyoming. The agency's statewide objective is between 2,700 and 3,700 animals.

Meanwhile, more than 30,000 horses are in holding facilities across the West, where most are made available for adoption. But those deemed too old or otherwise unadoptable are sent to long-term holding facilities to live out their lives -- some for 15 to 20 years.

Wild horses that are captured during roundups in Wyoming are taken to the BLM's holding facilities in Rock Springs, where they are offered up for adoption. Federal cowboys captured around 1,750 wild horses during two massive roundups in southwest Wyoming last year.

The agency also has agreements with the Wyoming Honor Farm in Riverton, a state correctional facility, where wild horses are trained by residents, and with the Mantle Ranch near Wheatland, where wild horses are gentled and trained.

Bonnie Matton, president of the Wild Horse Preservation League, said Monday she wasn't surprised by the BLM's predicament.

"In all fairness, BLM has done a lot of things wrong," said Matton, who believes more should be done to market wild horses as a tourist lure, with some of the money raised going to support the animals.

"We are at the point where we need to do something serious," she said. "They really do have a can of worms."

Last week the BLM said it was seeking bids from people around the country to provide pasture and care for 500 to 2,500 horses taken from the range that are considered unadoptable.

The horse management program had been successful until recently, according to the agency. But in the face of an economic downturn that means higher costs for fuel as well as feed, adoption rates have dropped off significantly over the past year with no improvement in sight, Bisson said.

"I think the high price of energy, the economy, the price of hay is having a huge impact on our program. People across America now need to make a choice: Do I buy another horse or buy gas for my pickup?" Bisson said.

Caring for so many animals is crippling the agency's budget, the deputy director said.

Last year about \$22 million of the entire horse program's \$39 million budget was spent on holding

horses in agency pens. Next year the costs are projected to grow to \$26 million with an overall budget that is being trimmed to \$37 million, Bisson said.

Continuing current practices would require a budget of \$58 million next year, escalating to \$77 million in 2012, BLM estimated.

"We have a responsibility to balance the budget, so we are going to have to make some tough choices," Bisson said. "We don't want to do this at the last minute. So we need to have a conversation with horse advocates and try to share the pain a little bit so people understand that if we have to make those tough changes, it's not because we want to."

Bisson said none of the alternatives will be popular.

"I want to be really clear," he said at Monday's board meeting. "We have not made a decision as to what we're going to do at this point."

If roundups are ended, he expects an outcry from horse protection advocates and from sheep and cattle ranchers who see the mustangs as competition for feed on the open range. If horses are euthanized, the outrage will come from horse protection groups, he said.

"Those are difficult choices to make," Bisson said. "But the law allows us to utilize those choices or some combination of that."

At least three roundups are planned in the coming weeks to remove about 1,700 wild horses in Nevada, where the BLM says ongoing drought has left dwindling forage and water for an overabundance of animals.

Bisson said the board will have to make the difficult decisions when it meets in September.

Jill Buckley of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals said she was concerned with another option that would allow outright unlimited sales of horses, as opposed to adoptions where owners are screened and pledge to keep the animals for a year.

While slaughtering horses is banned in the United States, Buckley fears many would be taken to Mexico or Canada where it is legal.

"We don't want to see that happen," she said.

Neda DeMayo, founder of Return to Freedom, a wild horse sanctuary in Lompoc, Calif., also questioned who would determine which animals are left on the range and which are removed.

"So far, there been no conservation oversight," she said, to ensure a "genetically healthy viable herd structures."