

Finger pointing in death of confiscated Western Shoshone horses

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by: Ryan Slattery / Indian Country Today

EUREKA, Nev. - When news spread recently across the horse community that 47 mares and foals had died at Fish Creek Ranch there was much anger but surprisingly little shock.

Back in January when the Bureau of Land Management first announced plans to confiscate the herd of two Western Shoshone sisters, horse rescue groups denounced the decision saying the stress of a helicopter-led brigade would traumatize pregnant mares putting them in danger of miscarriage.

But in February the BLM moved ahead with its orders to remove the wild herd belonging to Carrie and Mary Dann. Concern, the agency said, began the summer before when officials estimated about 2,000 animals were grazing on the South Buckhorn allotment, an area stuck in the middle of a severe drought that had reduced streams to mud puddles and decimated foliage for them to feed on.

But not everyone agreed.

"The horses were fine out there on the range," said Julie Fishel, the director of lands recognition for the Western Shoshone Defense Project. "The only thing that was a danger to them was the BLM."

Not the case, said JoLynn Worley, a BLM spokeswoman. The attempt to move the horses was to save them and the agency was well within their window of opportunity to do so. Worley said the BLM conducts their wild horse roundups between July and the end of February before the foaling season. The roundup in question began on Feb. 6 and ended 12 days later.

The BLM roundup has already gained legendary status in horse rescue circles. It's been dubbed the "Dann sisters roundup" and "The 980 Project," named for the original estimate of the number of horses being brought in.

Horse rescue groups are sticking by their guns and blaming the deaths on the timing of the roundup saying that running the horses 20 to 30 miles a day over icy terrain was asking for trouble.

"You wouldn't ask a woman who is eight months pregnant to run a marathon. It's just crazy what they did," said Jill Starr, head of Lifesavers Wild Horse Rescuers in Lancaster, Calif. Starr took possession of 153 horses after the deaths at Fish Creek.

Prior to the roundup the Danns did remove nearly half - they estimate about 400 - horses from the Crescent Valley range, southwest of Elko, and in an 11th hour agreement with California rancher Slick Gardner made arrangements for him to take over the rest of the herd and temporary hold them at Fish Creek in Eureka.

That's where things get a little sticky.

The horses, a few adults but mostly foals, died over a period of weeks, perhaps months, following the controversial roundup. Some were stillborn, others died of starvation and many of the young were too weak to stand and died when they were trampled in a corral too small to hold them.

Luke Wise, the Nevada rancher at Fish Creek, claims Gardner, who he was holding the horses for, failed to pay and adequately provide feed for the animals that arrived at his corral leading to their deteriorating condition. Gardner denies that ever happened.

"Everybody likes to point fingers," Gardner said from his Buellton ranch. "Nobody was up there when these horses needed help. Nobody but me. When Luke said we needed to go to four bails of feed I said 'fine.'"

Gardner, and the BLM agrees, says that the horses were in "poor condition" when they got to the ranch.

"They were full of parasites," Gardner said. "It was no fault of the Danns and no fault of anyone else. There was a drought situation up there and they had nothing to eat."

Although Gardner accepts part of the blame he says the climate and politics are the real reason for the demise of the horses.

"You can't sit in Washington D.C. and make rules about things you don't understand," Gardner said. "These people didn't know anything about how to care for the horses but they gave the orders. They threw the BLM into a swimming pool with their hands tied behind their back."

For three decades the Dann sisters and the federal government have sparred over land rights in the valley. The BLM says the Danns have been illegally grazing cattle and horses on the range for more than 30 years and owe the government \$3 million in grazing fees over that time.

The Danns say the land belongs to the Shoshone tribe under the Treaty of Ruby Valley signed in 1863 and that the BLM has no right to tell them what they can do on their property. Yet last fall the BLM confiscated 227 cattle belonging to the Danns and followed that with the winter horse roundup.

"This was done to show the Western Shoshone people that they can do whatever they want, whenever they want to. To show their strength," Carrie Dann said of land managers. "The BLM should share the responsibility for those horses dying. They should be accountable for their actions."

But for now the debate continues. Not only on what happened or who is to blame for Fish Creek but over the land itself.

"The horses are just a pawn in the whole BLM versus the Dann sisters' dispute," said Starr. "They're the pawns in the power play between the two."