

# Nevada wild horse policy: Shoot first

## Wildlife official retreats from incriminating e-mail

by GEORGE KNAPP

WHAT'S the best way to manage wild horses and burros on public rangeland? The preferred method, according to the Nevada Department of Wildlife, is to shoot them.

Proposals by the federal Bureau of Land Management to euthanize thousands of captured wild horses have generated scorn and outrage among defenders of the wild horse herds. Now, the department is competing with the Bureau of Land Management for the top spot on the horse advocate's hit list, thanks to candid comments made by the agency's Game Division Chief Russ Mason -- that's Russ Mason Ph.D. -- who thinks the most effective way to manage wild horses on public lands is to shoot them out on the range, rather than go to the trouble of rounding them up and making them available for adoption.

Mason's views were made public after wild horse defenders recently wrote to Nevada's wildlife department to ask why horses are not mentioned whatsoever on the department's website. The Game Division is dependent on the sale of hunting tags to sportsmen, and sportsmen see wild horses as competitors for forage that might otherwise be consumed by deer, elk, and bighorn sheep.

For the wildlife department, it's a no-brainer. Horses are bad for business.

Mason's matter-of-fact reply e-mail correctly explained that most wild horses are under BLM jurisdiction. The Wildlife Department's authority encompasses a few scattered herds that roam across mostly-private lands around Virginia City. His e-mail repeated an oft-asserted falsehood that horses do not deserve their protected status since the species is not indigenous to North America. In the e-mail, Mason proclaims that horses are an exotic and invasive species that weren't introduced into the wild until the 19th century, when ranchers and cavalry officers released them onto the open range.

The statement is demonstrably false and ignores volumes of scientific research conducted in Mason's own backyard over the last 50 years. The ancestors of modern horses were born in North America, and later spread to the rest of the world. Thousands of them roamed the Las Vegas Valley centuries before the first humans arrived. (The petrified skeleton of one prehistoric horse has been displayed inside the Nevada State Museum at Lorenzi Park for many years, a fact that has seemingly escaped Mason's scholarly research.)

Without prompting, Mason opined that "the only agency in the state that effectively manages wild horse and burro populations is, remarkably enough, the National Park Service," since, in his words, "that agency shoots wild horses and burros to preserve habitat conditions on the Lake Meade [sic] National Recreation Area."

Intrigued by this accusation, television news producer Ian Russell telephoned Mason to ask if he was the author of the e-mail and what proof, if any, he might have to support it. Mason told Russell he obtained the information from National Park Service officials he knows. When asked if he could contact his sources so they might confirm that such a policy exists, Mason said he would try. Russell spoke with Mason a second time and says the wildlife official strenuously defended the use of bullets as a management tool for horses and burros on public land. He also told Russell, for the second time,

that his information about the Park Service policy was accurate.

A horrified National Park Service official flatly and firmly denied Mason's assertions. Kent Turner, the chief resource manager for the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, characterized the allegations as "completely and categorically untrue." Turner said the Park Service has "no idea how any employee of NDOW could make such a statement." Documents provided by National Park Service officials specify any horse or burro removal from Park Service territory is conducted by the BLM under a contractual agreement that has been in force for the last 13 years.

Earlier this month, Mason's inflammatory e-mail was posted on the website of KLAS Channel 8. The following day, a Nevada Department of Wildlife public affairs specialist named Kelly Clark phoned the station to find out more. But the agency wasn't interested in backtracking. Clark expressed the opinion that the e-mail had been manufactured out of thin air by die-hard wild horse advocates. She indicated that Mason denied that he was the author of any such e-mail, even though there was more than one exchange between Mason and members of the public, and in spite of the trail of electronic bread crumbs leading back to his state wildlife department e-mail address.

When informed that Mason had already confirmed his authorship of the e-mail in phone conversations, Clark asked if the calls had been recorded on tape. As any journalist knows, it is illegal in Nevada to record phone conversations without both parties consenting to the taping. Clark told Russell that, since there is no audio recording of the conversations with Mason, there is no proof Mason ever admitted he wrote the e-mail. Phone records can confirm conversations with Mason took place on two occasions, but the wildlife department has circled the wagons and insists Mason never wrote or said any of the things attributed to him. And that's that.

"I'm not surprised at all," says longtime wild horse advocate Jerry Reynoldson, a former chief aide to U.S. Sen. Harry Reid. "NDOW's goal has always been the promotion of exotic species that generate money for the agency, like bighorn sheep, and it's always at the expense of the horses. They see horses as a threat to their sales of sheep tags and elk tags and all the rest."

Reynoldson says Nevada's Department of Wildlife apparatus is in perfect sync with the ranching industry, which has used its influence in the Bush administration to round up more than 75,000 wild horses in seven years, arguing the 20,000 horses still living in the wild are a serious threat to the health of public lands. The 3-4 million cattle on the same lands are not a threat, apparently.

"If NDOW could make money by selling horse tags to hunters, if some hunter would pay big bucks to bag a mustang and put a stuffed horse head over the mantle, maybe their attitude would change," Reynoldson says.



PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

A pilot tries to herd wild horses in a roundup program.