

REINING IN THE HERD

BLM roundup plan draws critics

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Wild horses, like those featured on the Nevada state quarter, will be rounded up in January under a federal plan that calls for removing all but a few dozen from public lands on the outskirts of the Las Vegas Valley.

Preservationists with the group Wild Horses 4 Ever called the Bureau of Land Management plan an attempt to "zero out" hundreds of horses in herds on six management areas in the Spring Mountains and west of Lake Mead.

They said they are bewildered that the BLM can afford \$350,000 to round up 250 wild horses and 570 burros from the Spring Mountains, plus 60 animals from areas near Lake Mead, but can't pay to repair water supplies where one of the 13 remaining wild horses in the Red Rock herd area was found dead recently.

"It's very disheartening when you look at the numbers they want to take off," Laurie Howard, vice president of Wild Horses 4 Ever, said Friday. "It really comes down to does America in general, and especially Nevada, want those horses and burros or not?"

The BLM will receive comments through Aug. 7, as part of an environmental assessment of its proposal.

In the meantime, Howard said the BLM has failed to maintain and repair water tanks at Tunnel Springs and Bird Spring south of Red Rock Canyon. A dead hawk and some dead rodents were found floating recently in one of the tanks damaged by a wildfire. At another site, water supply lines were clogged.

BLM officials acknowledged that a dead horse was found near Bird Spring. They said a necropsy wasn't conducted, but they concluded that humans didn't kill the horse.

Regarding the planned roundup, Karla Norris, assistant field manager for the BLM's Las Vegas Field Office, sent a letter dated Monday to interested parties. "Removal of excess wild horses and burros ... is proposed to prevent deterioration of the range and to achieve and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance keeping with the multiple-use management concept for the area," the letter states.

After January's roundup, most of the horses and burros will be sent to a boarding facility. The horses and burros will be gathered by government cowboys assisted by a helicopter. Healthy horses will be put up for adoption and horses that are at least 10 years old will be sent to a long-term holding facility, or sanctuary.

"We need good, scientific input, not just generalized comments that say 'don't gather,'" Norris said of the scoping process and public comment. "We're looking for thoughtfully considered comments and input beyond the emotional -- something we can actually use in preparation of the plan. How are we going to protect the herd and how are we going to protect the resources at the same time?"

At Cold Creek, 50 miles northwest of Las Vegas, a band of 12 wild horses and two foals grazed on grass and spearmint Friday near a pond north of the rural community.

Wes Pfrimmer and Lauryl Souza of Las Vegas rode past the band on an all-terrain vehicle.

Pfrimmer said he thinks rounding up the horses is a bad idea.

"People come up here to see them," he said. "What's their point in rounding them up?"

Said Souza: "They should just let them be. They take care of themselves and they don't bother anybody. The quality of life here is so much better for them than to be owned by anyone."

BLM wild horse specialist Jerrie Bertola said all but 26 of some 200 wild horses and foals will be removed from that area, which is part of the Wheeler Pass Herd Management Area. Foals are not counted in the figure. They will remain with their mothers after the roundup.

Counting all of the Spring Mountains complex, only 47 adult horses will remain under the so-called "appropriate management level" that was set in December.

She said all wild horses will be removed from the Johnnie Herd Management Area, west of Wheeler Pass, as well as in the Muddy Mountains, northeast of the Las Vegas Valley.

Under drought conditions four years ago, an emergency roundup was conducted to trim the number of horses around Cold Creek. But the horses that were left continued to reproduce and this year there was "a bumper crop" of foals, Bertola said.

Bertola said BLM officials are considering giving birth-control injections to mares that are returned to the range after January's roundup. "Fertility control could be an option we would consider," she said, noting the shot remains effective for about three years.

The Nevada Division of Wildlife supports the roundup plan, saying it's "much needed" in the greater Spring Mountains herd areas where limited food and water are available to support horses, burros and wildlife, including 120 elk.

"If wild horse and burro populations cannot be managed within the HMAs (herd management areas) under the tenants of the Act of 1971, ... then we strongly recommend the bureau remove wild horses and/or burros to levels as sound impact prevention. This may mean removing all horses and/or burros from an HMA," wrote Nevada Division of Wildlife supervisory biologist Brad Hardenbrook in a November letter.

In an interview Thursday, Hardenbrook said the wildlife situation in the Spring Mountains should not be construed as a competition between elk and horses for food and water. Elk, he said, have declined from 243 in 1996 to 120 this year after years of drought and additional pressures from human encroachment on their "safe-secure space."

Howard, of the wild horse advocacy group, said, however, that the BLM needs to take the elk into account in its environmental assessment. To do otherwise, is unfair, she said.

The Division of Wildlife contends wild horses in the Spring Mountains are the descendants of stock animals that were abandoned or escaped from ranches in the 1950s and 1960s.

Elk in the Spring Mountains are either descendants of those that were transplanted from Yellowstone National Park more than six decades ago, or a few generations removed from elk that were released in

1984 in Lovell Canyon, 20 miles southwest of Cold Creek.

Howard said with proper management, both horses and elk can coexist.

But as for the fate of Southern Nevada's wild horses, "We are very short on time," she said. "These animals are being eliminated and once they're off the range they are not coming back on the range."



Wild horses graze near a pond in Cold Creek, 50 miles northwest of Las Vegas. The Bureau of Land Management plans to round up all but a few dozen wild horses from public lands on the outskirts of the Las Vegas Valley.

Photo by John Gurzinski.



Billie Young, of the preservation group Wild Horses 4 Ever, lifts a dead rodent from a water tank at Tunnel Springs.

Photo by John Gurzinski.

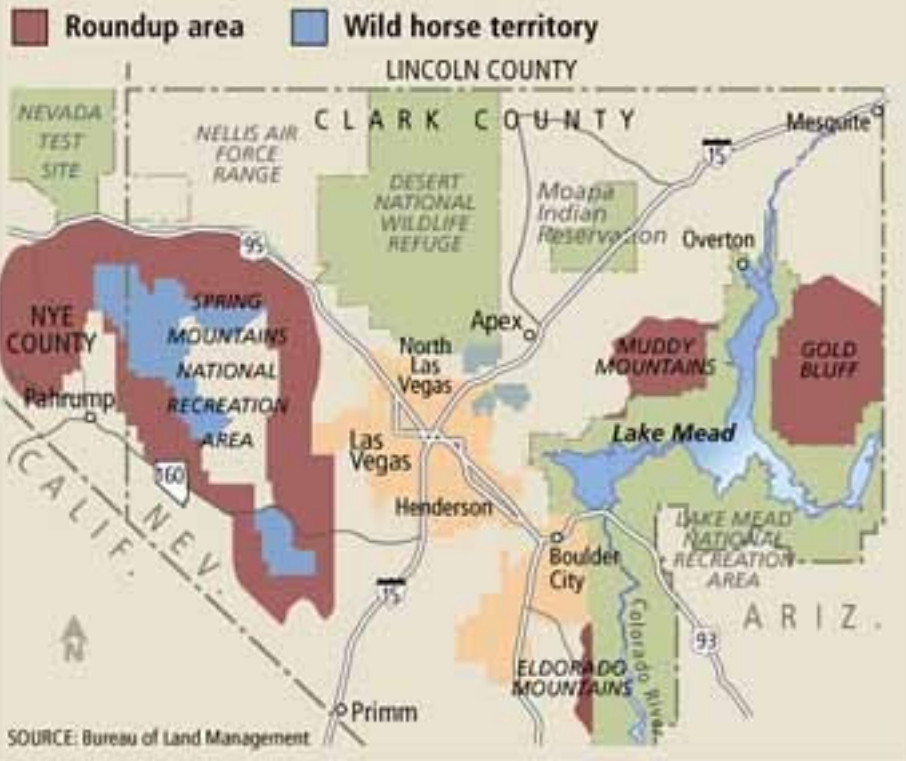


Wild horses graze Friday near a pond in Cold Creek. The BLM is planning to round up 250 of the wild horses and 570 burros from the Spring Mountains in early 2007.

Photo by John Gurzinski.

Roundup plan

In January, the Bureau of Land Management plans to gather and remove 250 wild horses and 570 burros from the Johnnie, Red Rock and Wheeler Pass herd management areas in the Spring Mountains and 60 animals from the Gold Butte, Muddy Mountains and El Dorado Mountains herd management areas. The roundup area includes the U.S. Forest Service's Spring Mountains Wild Horse Territory.



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Graphic by Mike Johnson.