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Efforts to return them to Coyote Canyon fail

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ANZA-BORREGO DESERT STATE PARK – The feral horses of Coyote Canyon, which captivated park visitors and horse lovers before being removed last year, will not be returning, a federal agency has decided.



Union-Tribune file photo
Wild horses rounded up last year in Coyote Canyon were held in a corral before being shipped to sanctuaries. Efforts to return them to the canyon have failed.

The Bureau of Land Management, responding to requests from equestrian groups and two state senators that the horses be taken back to the canyon, has determined the animals would be better off adopted.

"I'm disappointed, but I can't say I'm surprised," said state Sen. Bill Morrow, R-Oceanside, who with state Sen. Dennis Hollingsworth, R-La Mesa, introduced unsuccessful legislation to return the herd.

In March 2003, the state Department of Parks and Recreation hired a contractor to use a helicopter and wranglers to round up 29 wild horses. Ten stallions were supposed to be castrated before being taken to a sanctuary near Bishop, but a lawsuit by equestrian groups temporarily halted the plan. Mares were taken to a sanctuary in South Dakota. But the fight over the future of the horses may not be over.

"We're going to consider action along with some of the other people who have been involved in this and see what the best course is," Hollingsworth said.

He said it still wasn't clear who had jurisdiction over the horses because there was evidence the herd had lived on federal land, as well as on state park property.

A moot point, said park Superintendent Mark Jorgensen.

"BLM in the 1980s had already determined, and reaffirmed later on, that that herd was not a viable herd of horses and was going to be" removed, Jorgensen said. "Their own management plans called for them to be removed. They just never did it."

Mike Pool, director of the bureau in California, decided that an Anza property owner, already in possession of 10 wild horses that wandered out of Coyote Canyon a year before the roundup, would be allowed to adopt them; 18 mares would be adopted by the South Dakota sanctuary where they

were placed last year; and nine stallions would be gelded and adopted through the bureau's wild horse and burro adoption program.

Of the 29 horses rounded up, two older ones have since died, Jorgensen said.

The bureau is aiming to have the horses ready for its adoption event in Beaumont on Nov. 6 and 7. Information on the adoption requirements is available on the Internet at <http://www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov> or by calling (800) 370-3936.

The Coyote Canyon horses were descendants of animals freed from ranches 60 to 70 years ago. Park officials called the removal an "emergency" measure to save the animals from starvation and disease. The park had long considered rounding up the herd because it competed for food with native species, particularly the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep.

The park was quickly challenged by the Backcountry Horsemen of California and the California State Horsemen's Association, who questioned the emergency description and persuaded Morrow and Hollingsworth to help reverse the park's decision.

Morrow said the removal of the horses without time for public review raised doubts about park officials' motives.

"By the time everyone found out, it was too late to respond," Morrow said. Pictures taken of the horses after their capture showed they were healthy, he said.

Les Levie, a member of the Backcountry Horsemen, said he and others were undeterred by the decision and would try to adopt the stallions and eventually return them to the canyon.

"We're still trying to bring them back here," Levie said.

In a letter to the senators, Pool wrote that the herd had made its home on bureau land that was transferred to the state parks department. Before the transfer, the federal government made plans to remove the herd.

Given the history, Pool wrote, it was "now in the best interest of the animals that they be made available for adoption and placed into private care as quickly as possible." The horses are in excellent health, he wrote.

Bureau policy is to geld all stallions before adoption, but Morrow has asked that an exception be made. He said there are people who wish to adopt the horses and continue the bloodline.

That romantic view of the horses, however, is misdirected, Jorgensen said.

"You can try to build a nice, western mythology about it, but the truth was, they were neglected and abandoned," he said.

"All of a sudden these are the horses that won the West."