

A Roundup of Wild Horses Stirs Up a Fight in the West

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The helicopter, hovering low, nearly drowned out the hoofbeats of the 18 wild horses as it chased them through the brush. By the time the animals were herded into a jute-fenced trap, miles later, they were sweating through their thick winter coats, eyes wide and scared, nostrils flaring.

It was most likely the first time that the horses, which live deep in this high desert of northern Nevada, had seen a helicopter, a corral or a person.

By midmorning the herd was on its first truck, crammed tight with about 40 other horses rounded up within a few hours by helicopter for the federal Bureau of Land Management, which planned to send them away for eventual adoption.

The horses were among 46,000 wild horses and burros that roam the remotest ranges of 10 Western states from New Mexico to Oregon. They are descendants of the horses of cowboys and Indians, pioneers and miners, ranchers and explorers. While many who are concerned about the welfare of the horses revere them as a living legacy of the Wild West, resentful ranchers see the horses as pests that compete for grazing lands with cattle and sheep. For decades, the two sides have fought bitterly over which animals should be entitled to how much land.

The bureau wants to settle the issue by reducing the herds by half -- to about 24,000 -- by 2005. Only by rounding up excess wild horses, it says, can the horses be saved and the habitat be preserved for all the animals that graze on it, including cattle owned by private ranchers who buy grazing rights to the public land.

"It's a complicated formula that takes in not only the number of users, but also the rate of growth of plants and the rainfall," said Maxine Shane, a spokeswoman for the agency's office in Reno, Nev.

But animal welfare advocates say that the agency's plan, announced in October 2000, favors rich and powerful ranching interests over the herds, and may push the horses to extinction. Among their many criticisms, they say that the agency arrives at what it calls its "appropriate management levels" after factoring in all other habitat users. They also see the adoption program as woefully inadequate. Though there are not enough takers for the horses, the agency keeps adding horses to the adoption rolls without increasing public awareness of the program, the critics say. Worse, they say, the agency's own documents prove that some adopted horses end up in slaughterhouses.

In September, the Fund for Animals and the Animal Legal Defense Fund filed a lawsuit challenging the herd reduction plan, halting its efforts to double the average number of horses gathered this year to 13,000 until a judge rules this summer on the plan's legitimacy.

"The program has been fraught with serious problems from its inception," said Andrea Lococo, a regional coordinator for the Fund for Animals, which has a second lawsuit pending against the bureau under the Freedom of Information Act to obtain information about horses going to slaughter.

The agency says that since it began its adoption program more than 30 years ago, 185,000 horses have

been adopted by the public, with only a tiny fraction ending up in slaughterhouses.

"In a 14-month period from December 1999 to February 2000, we tracked 420 horses previously on public lands that ended up in slaughterhouses," said Larry Fenfer, a spokesman for the agency in Washington.

"We would like that number to be zero," Mr. Fenfer said, "but obviously it's a very small number compared to the successful adoptions."

But the Fund for Animals says its investigations have found that most adopted horses end up in Canadian slaughterhouses, for which there are no records.

"We're still waiting on information from our FOIA lawsuit to determine numbers," Ms. Lococo said.

Those who adopt wild horses must sign an affidavit swearing they will not have them slaughtered or used for profit. But a year after an adoption, the person who adopted the horse takes title to it and the bureau has no control over its fate, Mr. Fenfer said.

That point is disputed by the Fund for Animals, which says that the 1971 law protecting the wild horses and burros makes it clear that the horses are to be protected from exploitation throughout their lives, not for just a year.

In 1997, an investigation by The Associated Press found that agency officials allowed the slaughter of hundreds of adopted wild horses, falsified records and tried to prevent investigators from uncovering the truth. Mr. Fenfer said that "things have been tightened up considerably since then."

"Everyone in the B.L.M. considers the horses the signature symbol of the public lands," he said.

"They're a big part of how we identify ourselves and how we identify the public lands."

Still, opposition to the agency's plans has been bitter, and sometimes violent. Last October, a radical animal welfare group firebombed a bureau corral near Susanville, Calif., to protest the roundups. One firebomb started a fire that destroyed a barn and about 250 tons of hay. Vandals also tore down part of a fence but failed to free the roughly 160 horses in the corral.

Not everyone considers the horses a treasure to be preserved. Dean Rhoads, a Republican state senator and cattle rancher in Nevada who owns 40,000 acres and leases 60,000 acres from the federal government, derailed a bill last year, prompted by a group of fourth graders, to make wild horses the Nevada state animal.

"Many of us felt that to have wild horses as the state animal would raise their stature higher than what we think it should be," Mr. Rhoads said. "If anything is destroying native habitat, it is the wild horses."

He said that, besides being inbred, "horses that a horseman wouldn't buy," they cost taxpayers money. The \$16 million a year spent on the adoption program is never recouped, he said. "It costs B.L.M. about \$1,200 a head to gather the horses, and they get \$125 a head in the adoption. So the taxpayers are really getting ripped off."

Jason Campbell, a spokesman for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, an industry group in

Washington, said that animal advocacy organizations were, in effect, supporting environmental destruction. "The problem with wild horses running around is they screw up improvements such as water tanks and water developments," Mr. Campbell said. "They run down fences. With their broad feet, they destroy water springs and other things consistent with historical grazing use."

Any time the bureau tries to reduce the herd, he added, "they get sued right out of the box."

"Then they have to negotiate, then go to mediation and settle, and they wind up removing fewer horses," he said. "So then there are more colts the next year, more horses, and more conflict."

Wild horse protection organizations, of which there are at least a dozen, say that the government already removes too many horses. "I just don't see where they've counted the horses in a real way," said Bobbi Royce, president of Wild Horse Spirit, an advocacy organization in Carson City, Nev.

"They tout the fact that there are 23,000 or 24,000 horses in Nevada, but it just doesn't add up. If they're pulling out 8,000 or 9,000 horses each year, you can't do that year after year. You should have less and less."

(Bureau officials said that the horses breed at a rate of 20 percent a year.)

The real power behind the move to reduce the number of horses, Ms. Royce said, lies with the ranchers and cattle owners. "There are a lot of ranchers who are really large corporations. As permittees, they are allowed 40 acres of their own, but they are also allowed to get a loan on 240 acres of land they are using. So that's a nice, sweet deal. They have a renewal of permits every year, and they work hard to keep the status quo."

Here in Nevada, on a crisp, cold, sunny morning, the sight of wild horses galloping in tandem, their manes flying, was breathtaking -- until they came close enough to the wranglers for observers to notice how terrified they were.

Tricked by the wranglers' Judas horse, which led them toward a holding pen as they were chased by the helicopter, the horses were later loaded into a truck that would take them to be sorted by age and sex.

A few, deemed necessary to the wild herds, would be returned to the range, although one longtime wrangler said that they would eventually end up caught for good, even if it took a few more years of roundups.