

Wild horse roundup planned at Nev. wildlife refuge

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RENO, Nev. – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intends to round up hundreds of wild horses this week from a national wildlife refuge on the Nevada-Oregon line, putting most up for adoption and sterilizing males before they are returned to the wild in an effort to keep the herd in check.

The gather at the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge was scheduled to begin Tuesday, officials said.

Refuge managers said of the 340 horses targeted for roundup, 200 of those deemed most desirable will be put up for adoption through the Tennessee-based Carr's Wild Horse and Burro Adoption Center, a private agency that has placed thousands of gathered mustangs and burros for nearly 30 years.

The remaining 140 will be released back into the wild, but males will be sterilized through vasectomy to try to stem population growth, officials said.

“This is a management experiment,” Paul Steblein, project manager at the refuge, said Monday. “We're very hopeful it will work well.”

“This is equivalent to what the Humane Society recommends for dog and cat populations across the country,” he added.

Steblein said mares 8 years old or older and studs 2 years or older will be released back onto the refuge.

The federal agency said stud horses will receive vasectomies instead of castration “so they will still exhibit normal social behaviors but be sterile.”

But some wild horse biologists and advocacy groups are skeptical.

Mary Ann Simonds, a horse behaviorist, said vasectomy could work if the herd's social hierarchy is maintained.

“You have to know which horse you're giving the vasectomy to,” she said. “If you give them to all the bachelor horses that have never been reproducing, it might be fine because they won't challenge the stallion.”

Matt Rossell, outreach coordinator for the animal rights group In Defense of Animals, also questioned the timing of the roundup, given the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's announcement this summer that it may have to begin euthanizing horses because there are too many in holding facilities and not enough people to adopt them.

“We think it's unethical and inappropriate to be rounding up any wild horses at this time when the

government, the BLM, has tens of thousands of horses in these holding pens and they announced they may have to start killing them,” Rossell said.

Wild horse groups pressured the refuge into canceling a roundup last year that critics said could have allowed the removal of up to 1,400 horses from the 500,000-acre refuge in northern Nevada and southeast Oregon.

While refuge managers say horses and burros are destroying the ecosystem set aside in the 1930s for native species like pronghorn antelope, horse advocates argue that since a ban on cattle grazing in the early 1990s, studies are needed to determine how many horses the landscape can support before they are removed in mass.

This spring, the Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to scale back the numbers of horses and burros it intends to remove, keeping populations at 2007 figures, while it completes an overall comprehensive management plan for the refuge expected to be completed in 2010.

Managers said 1,148 horses and 161 burros were counted on the refuge during an aerial survey in July.

Officials want to reduce and maintain populations at 800 and 90 respectively, until the management plan is finalized.

Burros will be gathered during the winter, officials said.

On the Net:

Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge: www.fws.gov/sheldonthartmtn

In Defense of Animals: www.idausa.org