
Wild horse roundup begins

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GREEN RIVER -- Federal land managers began a massive winter roundup Friday to reduce two overpopulated wild horse herds that roam eastern Sweetwater County in southwest Wyoming.

The wild horses will be captured from the adjacent Adobe Town and Salt Wells herd management units, which, when combined, represent the biggest herd of wild horses in Wyoming, according to Bureau of Land Management officials.

BLM state wild horse and burro program leader Alan Shepherd said the wild horse gathering aims to capture 1,760 wild horses from the two herds, whose population exceeds 2,000 animals.

The agency's goal is to remove 1,339 excess horses that will be put up for adoption as part of the agency's adopt-a-horse program. The agency also plans to use birth control methods on several hundred mares in the herds to reduce population growth over the next few years.

A horse advocacy group spokeswoman, however, called the winter roundup "ill-advised and potentially cruel" due to cold weather and treacherous footing. She said horses will likely get wet from running in the cold and could be susceptible to colds and other diseases.

BLM Public Affairs Officer Rey Adame said the winter gathering operation is part of the agency's ongoing effort to achieve herd management objectives in the state's wild horse herds.

Wyoming's wild horse population in recent years has reached as high as 7,000, more than double the BLM's target management level of 3,263 animals statewide.

There are 16 herd management areas in Wyoming, but most of the state's wild horse populations are concentrated in southwest Wyoming.

Adame said the Adobe Town herd management area has an appropriate management level of 700 wild horses, with a management range of 610 to 800 adult horses. The Salt Wells Creek management area has an appropriate management level of 300 horses, with an adult management range of 251 to 365.

Adame said the two herds have a current population estimated at 2,200 horses, well above the appropriate management level. He said agency population estimates are based on statistical models using direct observations of the wild horses, which are more accurate than direct counts.

The BLM plans to treat approximately 200 mares captured during the roundups with a fertility control vaccine. The mares will be released back into the herd management areas in an attempt to reduce population growth in the herds over the next two years.

Adame said the agency anticipates that using fertility control will reduce the potential 2009

population growth of the herds by 200 or 300 horses. Wild horses have no natural predators and reproduce at a rate of 15 to 20 percent annually.

Formula for sickness?

Ginger Kathrens, volunteer executive director of the Cloud Foundation Inc. -- a wild horse advocacy group that works to preserve genetically viable wild horse herds on public lands -- said running wild horses in the January snows is dangerous and ill-advised.

"The obvious concern is that the horses will likely get wet from running and will easily catch cold, which can lead to other complications such as pneumonia," Kathrens said in a phone interview. "It's just a formula for sickness."

Kathrens said snow and wet weather also make for very bad footing for the wild horses.

"You can't not expect to have some slips and falls and potential broken legs from the bad footing if it's muddy or snowy or wet or whatever," she said. "It's very unusual in a cold climate to run any horse."

Shepherd said the agency is always concerned about the health of the horses during roundups, summer or winter.

"Any time we gather ... there's always a chance of a horse getting hurt," he said in a phone interview. "But our contractor is very, very knowledgeable about catching horses and how to treat them right."

Shepherd said wild horses are brought into the capture traps at slower rates than during summer to help with footing and to not overheat the animals. "Like with any animal worked during wintertime, they're going to sweat a bit, but we try our best to avoid all those types of risks," he said.

Shepherd said it should take four to five weeks to round up the 1,700 horses, depending on the weather.

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