

Whoa! How to rein in the US's wild horses

By Sara Reardon in Nevada high desert



With drought rife and food scarce, this is no country for old mares
(Image: Yva Momiatiuk and John Eastcott/Minden Pictures/NGS)

SIX mustangs race across the horizon, terrified, through billows of dust. A helicopter buzzes just 10 metres above their heads, harrying them, driving them out of the pink and cream-coloured Nevada desert and towards the first holding pen they've ever known.

It seems harsh, but this is the best chance these horses have got. Here in south-east Nevada, near Tonopah – an area that has been in near-constant drought for six years – grazing is limited, and cattle ranchers want the horses off the range. Meanwhile, the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which is organising today's round-up, is struggling just to keep their number in check.

Since the 1970s, the BLM has gathered thousands of horses each year, trying to prevent them from dying of starvation due to overpopulation. The costs have skyrocketed to \$74 million a year, 60 per cent of which is spent on holding facilities that now keep some 49,000 horses and donkeys penned up. Congress is unlikely to increase the BLM budget any further, so this year it is only rounding up horses from the regions experiencing the most dire conditions. But the drought is unlikely to end before the pens reach capacity, expected before the end of 2014. Crunch time looms.

"We're very concerned," Shawna Richardson of the BLM's Tonopah office says, as the jittery horses are corralled. "I don't know what will happen." The mustangs clatter past us into a metal chute that holds them while handlers check their physical condition and sort them by sex. Many have ribs showing and Richardson says it is likely that some of the mares have lost their foals. The surrounding desert contains only sage grass, so many hungry horses take to the road, where they are a threat to cars, to eat alfalfa hay that has blown from farm trucks.

The best solution to the overpopulation problem, says Cheryl Asa of the St. Louis Zoo in Missouri, would be to round up the horses, treat them with contraceptives, and release them. The most promising contraceptive is porcine zona pellucida (PZP), which causes a mare's immune system to attack fertilised eggs. PZP appears highly effective in wild horses, but needs to be followed up with a second dose, requiring another round-up. And it is only effective for two years.

Perhaps because of this, the BLM's contraception efforts to date have been meagre. According to a report by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), released in June, only about 500 to 1000 of the estimated 40,000 animals on the range are treated and released each year. "It's essentially a token effort," says NAS study co-author, Robert Garrott of Montana State University in Bozeman.

The report blasted the BLM for its poor contraception programme and, here on the ground, the Stetson-wearing biologists charged with looking after the horses hope that changes will come soon. "Some things needed to be blasted [by the NAS]," agrees Dustin Hollowell of the BLM, as he circles the corral to look at the 24 horses collected today. He and Richardson believe that, imperfect as it is, using PZP in the most overpopulated regions would help greatly. BLM spokesman Tom Gorey says the agency does plan to expand the programme and will be releasing a response to the report this year.

But after decades of rounding up horses rather than treating them, the agency may have painted itself into a corner. There is overpopulation in most areas of the 10 western states across which the horses roam, Richardson says. And as the NAS report pointed out, uncertainties in counting the animals over such a vast area mean estimates could be far too low.

To free up holding space, the most economical option would be to kill the horses that do not get adopted. But although US law permits this, the BLM itself refuses to consider such action, largely because of public opposition. "We wouldn't have 50,000 horses in holding if euthanasia was an option," Hollowell says.

"We would not have 50,000 horses living in holding if euthanasia was an option"

After a time, the newest guests of the BLM settle down, with only an occasional whinny floating up from behind the corral's fence. Next week, they'll be shipped to holding pens in California, branded, gelded and offered for adoption online. Their chances aren't good: only 2600 animals were adopted last year while 5700 were added to holding pens for the rest of their lives. "One has to ask: is that what a wild horse should be?" says Garrott.

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