

47 horses in BLM roundup end up dead

By Scott Sonner

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Federal agents and sheriff's deputies were investigating the deaths of 47 horses that may have starved in northeast Nevada and been dumped on federal land after they were rounded up in a dispute with two American Indian sisters.

Necropsies were planned to determine the exact cause of the deaths of the horses — mostly foals — found at two sites on Bureau of Land Management land in the Little Smokey Valley about 18 miles south of Eureka, BLM spokesman Mike Brown said Tuesday.

Most of them “appear to have died from malnutrition or trampling,” Brown said.

As many as 10 were adults; the rest young were offspring — some newborns.

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DANN
SISTERS

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'Very tragic'

Death by trampling in a corral "is what would happen to foals that are too weak, and they just don't get up after they are born," Brown said.

There's no indication any of the horses were shot or otherwise physically harmed, he said.

"The BLM is concerned about the dumping on public land," he said. "We're working with the Eureka County sheriff's office.

"There were reports in May that some of the animals being held at a temporary location (after the roundups) were in poor condition," Brown said.

Sheriff's deputies discovered the dead horses during the weekend.

A veterinarian estimated some had been dead for two to three weeks, but some might have been dead for as long as two to three months, Brown said.

He said the horses do not appear to be federally protected wild horses and most likely once belonged to the Western Shoshone sisters Mary and Carrie Dann, who've been at odds with the BLM for years over horses they grazed on land they claim belongs to the Shoshones.

An official for an animal rescue group that found homes for some of the horses the BLM rounded up suspects the horses already were in bad shape and became malnourished after a California rancher failed to make good on his agreement to transfer them from a holding corral at Fish Creek Ranch near Eureka to his own ranch in Buellton, Calif.

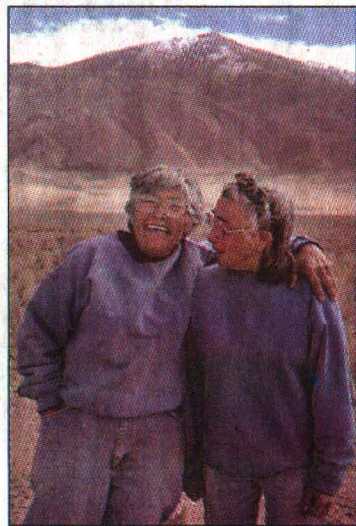
"It's very tragic," said Jill Starr of Lifesavers Wild Horse Rescuers in Lancaster, Calif.

"When horses are rounded up by helicopters, it stresses out the mares so they often abort, have still births or give birth to weak foals," she said. "Some of them were just too far gone to make it."

A lawyer for the Danns blamed the BLM on Tuesday for rounding up the horses in the first place.

"Those horses were fine out on the range where they were. This is the result of misguided federal policy — your taxpayer dollars at work," said Julie Fishel of the Western Shoshone Defense Project in Crescent Valley.

The BLM rounded up more than 500 horses belonging to the



Associated Press file

LAND CLAIMS: Carrie, left, and Mary Dann, two Western Shoshone sisters, have battled the federal government for 30 years over their tribe's claim to aboriginal lands.

Danns in February. In the fall, the agency seized and sold 227 cattle belonging to the elderly grandmothers.

The BLM maintained the

Danns had been grazing hundreds of cattle and horses illegally for decades, to the detriment of the range and other ranchers who have permits to graze livestock in the region.

The Danns contend the land still belongs to the Shoshone tribe under the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley and that the BLM has no authority to regulate their grazing practices.

Starr said her rescue group ended up taking about 150 of the 500 horses.

Controversy swirls

Fishel said the California rancher, Slick Gardner, had agreed to take the rest and had arranged to keep them temporarily at the Fish Creek Ranch near Eureka, not far from where the dead horses were found.

Gardner already is under investigation in California for his handling of 250 horses he transferred to his ranch about 100 miles north of Los Angeles. He did not immediately return a telephone call seeking comment

on Tuesday.

Animal welfare investigators in Santa Barbara County said last month some of the mustangs on Gardner's ranch remain so weak and malnourished that their ribs are visible.

Gardner "bounced a check to us for inspection and veterinarian fees," Fishel said.

Gardner, who grew up on the ranch, said in June that the 246 horses he transferred there in February are fattening up and criticized others for "sensationalizing" the extent of their continued health problems.

Starr said she hasn't had time to worry about who to blame for the latest deaths.

"There are so many characters involved it's hard to trace," Starr said. "You can start with asking why BLM rounded them up when they were so (pregnant) and knew that was going to be hard on them."

"And then you can ask why didn't Slick Gardner finish what he started?" Starr said. "My concern has been to get the horses out of there and get them some help."