

Mystery mustang shootings put officials on spot

Wild horses massacred on the Nevada range

By Eric Brazil
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

CARSON CITY, Nev. — The outlaw gunners who killed more than 250 wild horses in central Nevada's outback have put federal and state officials on the spot and the livestock industry on the defensive.

Not even a state as rough-hewn and ruggedly individualistic as Nevada, where the frontier ethic is widely admired, can shrug off what appears to be one of the worst range massacres since buffalo were shot almost to extinction a century ago.

The shooting of wild horses has been a chronic, low-level Nevada problem since the 1971 enactment of a federal law criminalizing the killing or harassment of the species.

But "this is something special. This is not a case of a herder who shoots a horse to draw coyotes away," said Bob Stewart, Nevada spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which has launched an aggressive investigation. "It's exceedingly distressing."

The mustang killing ground is in roadless sagebrush-and-pinyon hills on both sides of lonely Highway 305 between Battle Mountain and Austin in Lander County, about 180 miles east of Reno.

There have been three finds in the 162-square-mile area so far, the first by a helicopter pilot in August, the last Oct. 1. The 268 horses found so far appear to have been killed during the last six months, officials say.

Many of the dead horses had their legs folded beneath them, a sign that they were dropped in



their tracks. Mustangs that die of natural causes have their legs outstretched, after thrashing around, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

BLM assessing the situation

And there may be more. To assess the situation, BLM contract helicopters are overflying the 100-plus areas where wild horses are known to roam.

Wild-horse advocates fear the worst. "There's a feeling out there that no matter what happens on the public rangelands, the BLM will excuse it anyway," said Dawn Lappin, executive director of Wild Horse Organized Assistance.

Nevada Gov. Richard Bryan returned from an inspection trip to the site of the latest kill and pledged state assistance in the investigation. He called the shootings "the product of a sick mind."

The grisly discoveries have highlighted contradictions inherent in "managing" the wild horse, which, despite a near-mythic reputation as a symbol of freedom, has a negative economic value from the viewpoint of Nevada cattle and sheep herders.



The skeletal remains of one of 41 wild horses found dead on federal rangeland near Austin, Nev.

BRIAN MCKENZIE

The 600-plus Nevada stock raisers whose animals — 500,000 cattle, 96,000 sheep — graze the public lands that make up 87 percent of the state, regard wild horses as unwanted competition for food.

Terri Jay, executive director of Nevada's Commission for the Preservation of the Wild Horse in Carson City, said cattlemen outgun wild-horse advocates politically and intimidate the BLM.

'Deck stacked against horses'

"The state and the county DAs don't take it (enforcing state law protecting wild horses) seriously. It's a big joke," Jay said. "It's really tough when you see how far the deck is stacked against the horses."

Lappin said Gov. Bryan, despite his recently expressed concern for wild horses, seemed to go out of his way to make the commission on which she serves ineffective by appointing to it Deloyd Satterthwaite, president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association.

Last February, Satterthwaite denounced a film produced by the

commission for romanticizing wild horses and portraying ranchers "in a derogatory manner." The film referred to the poor condition of some of Nevada's public rangeland and low grazing fees. (The state's cattle and sheep raisers paid \$2,399,000 in grazing fees in 1987, according to the BLM.)

Satterthwaite manages Ellison Ranches of Battle Mountain, which has a BLM permit to run sheep during the winter in the area where the killings occurred.

In a telephone interview from Winnemucca, Satterthwaite said those who are pointing the finger at the livestock industry for the killings have gone off half cocked.

"If in fact those horses were shot, there are so many people in the area that to blame the rancher at this particular time is ridiculous," he said. "There's more geologists running around in the state of Nevada than there are cattle."

Ranchers blamed last time, too

Satterthwaite noted that the last incident of high-profile wild-

horse deaths — 12 shootings in the Las Vegas area, 43 deaths by strangulation and dehydration in the Clan Alpine Mountains east of Fallon — also at first were blamed on ranchers. In fact, two sportsmen did the shooting, and the other deaths were caused by a BLM-sponsored experiment, Satterthwaite said. (The sportsmen were fined \$275 each and ordered to perform 120 hours of community service. Killing or harassing an animal protected by the 1971 Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act is as misdemeanor, punishable by a \$2,000 fine or two years in prison.)

Satterthwaite, like other stockmen interviewed, criticized the BLM as strongly as did wild-horse advocates, but from a different angle. The BLM "has not been keeping its end of the bargain," Satterthwaite said. "It's been a struggle to get the BLM to realize that we agreed to the '71 (wild) horse levels, and we're so much over those levels that we'll never get 'em (the horses) all gathered."

More than 38,000 horses roam the rangeland in 10 Western states, including as many as 28,000 in Nevada alone. At the turn of the century, there were about 2 million wild horses in the West. Their numbers had dwindled to about 17,000 in 1971 when Congress passed the protection law.

Henry Filippini Jr. of Reese River, who has a permit to graze his cattle in the mustang kill area, said he was "appalled" by the magnitude of the slaughter, but "all I know about it is what I read in the papers."

BLM will spend \$15.8 million to manage wild horses nationwide in 1988 — \$2.65 million in Nevada, where about 5,600 "excess" mustangs will be gathered and put up for adoption.

Stewart, Nevada's BLM spokesman, bristled at the suggestion that the long delay before the discovery of the killings indicated a flaccid management program. "We have a pro-active management program, but we're talking about horses spread over 48 million acres."

Except when it mounts an exceptional investigation, such as the one under way, BLM's Nevada law enforcement staff consists of just three agents.

The BLM is being tight-lipped about the progress of the investigation.

But Jay, a frequent bureau critic, said, "They're gonna get these guys. Yeah, there's too much pressure on them not to."

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