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Rancher Jimmy Williams stands next to carcass of wild horse in mountains of central Nevada.

HORSES: Slaughter of 451 Wild Animals Described as 'Product of a Sick Mind'

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tion over the region, and soon their investigators had found 41 dead horses in the area.

A month later the BLM found 153 more near Mt. Moses, a few miles to the northwest. And in early October they discovered 257 more on another range near Bald Mountain. By this week the total had grown to 451 dead horses, scattered over 160 square miles of desert, and the BLM said evidence indicated that virtually all had been shot. Some were freshly dead; others had been killed as long as two years ago.

Thus far the BLM has made no arrests in the case and has revealed little about the ongoing investigation. An agency spokesman said aerial shootings from helicopters or military planes have been ruled out and described the ammunition used as civilian, not military. Otherwise, law enforcement officials have declined to discuss the case, refusing even to disclose the number of agents working on the killings.

"We don't want the killers to know how many of our people are out there looking for them. We figure that to be an advantage for us," said Robert Steele, deputy state director.

Residents Outraged

Nonetheless, the case has generated outrage in Nevada, a state whose residents are normally dedicated to the rights of hunters and other gun users. Gov. Richard Bryan, in the midst of a campaign for the U.S. Senate, spent a day touring the area of the killings by helicopter and returned to say the shootings were "the product of a sick mind." Several groups, including the BLM, have offered rewards totaling \$17,000 for information leading to conviction of the killers.

Ugly incidents involving wild horses are not new in Nevada or other Western states. Regularly there have been isolated shootings and even cases involving the maiming of mustangs. But nothing has approached the scale of these killings. The horror of the deaths, and the absence of arrests, has provoked a number of theories about possible perpetrators and their motives.

The BLM says it has received a number of calls pointing the finger at extraterrestrials, and some others have suggested that the military might be using the horses for target practice. The sheer volume of calls about the military prompted the BLM to release its conclusions ruling out aerial shootings or the use of military ordnance.

After his helicopter tour, Gov. Bryan added speculation of his own, suggesting that the perpetrator might be "some deranged person who just thinks it is a great sport to go out there and shoot and kill something."

But several state and federal officials involved in wild horse management say the pattern of the killings and the large number of

deaths suggest another explanation. The horses most likely were the victims of a range war, they say, that has pitted the mustangs against large ranchers who raise cattle and sheep on the same public lands.

"The cattlemen hate the horses, and they believe the BLM is not doing enough to keep the horse population down," said Terri Jay, executive director of Nevada's Commission for the Preservation of the Wild Horse. "They think the horses are stealing forage that rightfully belongs to them."

Until the early 1970s, ranchers could easily control the number of horses on federal lands by applying for a local permit to "take" (shoot) a given number of animals. Such "takings" were regular occurrences, and the population of wild horses in Western states had fallen from 2 million in the 19th Century to 17,000 in 1971.

Those days passed forever when Congress, late that year, enacted the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. The law made it a federal crime to kill a wild horse and instructed the BLM to provide for the welfare of the remaining herds.

The agency now spends \$14 million a year on various wild horse efforts, including its famous adopt-a-horse program. The national population of wild horses has grown to 38,000, with 27,000 in Nevada alone. But after 17 years the BLM is still grappling for ways to reconcile the wild horse with those who see it as an interloper.

New BLM Program

Milt Frei, chief of wild horse management for the agency, said the shootings have come just as the BLM is about to embark on a new initiative to balance the interests of the wild horse against the livestock herds. Recent studies have shown that much of the BLM's land in Nevada is overgrazed, he said, and the agency has begun a reappraisal of just how many animals will be allowed to forage on federal land.

At present about 600,000 livestock animals graze on BLM lands in Nevada, and Frei estimated that ranchers could be asked to reduce their herds by as much as 20% to 40%.

It does not take extreme intelligence, Frei said, to realize that fewer horses will translate into more forage for cattle and sheep. Emphasizing that he was not accusing the ranchers of committing the shootings, Frei said, "Some people [ranchers] may have seen a problem coming and decided to make adjustments on their own."

Deloyd Satterthwaite, president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Assn., confirmed that the horses have caused bitterness on the part of some ranchers.

"They are very disturbed that the BLM cannot seem to do what Congress told it to do, which is manage the numbers of wild horses," Satterthwaite said. "When

there's not enough forage to go around, it's always the livestock that gets cut."

Nonetheless, Satterthwaite said, he cannot believe that ranchers committed the mass killings.

"The livestock people are the first ones that people think of. What they don't realize is how much a rancher has to lose," he said. "You stand to lose good standing with the BLM, and with that goes your livelihood."

In Austin, an old gold mining town that has recently seen a rebirth of activity, the debate also continues about the identity of the killers. Jimmy Williams, the local rancher who also operates one of the town's several saloons, believes the shootings are the culmination of the long-simmering war between wild horses and the ranchers.

"The ranchers used to shoot just a few at a time and nobody paid much attention. The only difference now is, they got a lot more ambitious," Williams said.

As to why the culmination came now, Williams says he is not certain. "There's been a number of lawsuits and injunctions saying you can't do this and can't do that with the wild horses. It could be that they [ranchers] got scared and decided to make their move," he said.

The true extent of the horses' threat to the cattle and sheep is difficult to gauge. In terms of sheer numbers, the threat would appear to be minimal. The 27,000 horses are dwarfed by the livestock herds of more than 500,000 on BLM lands. And BLM experts say that horses largely forage in areas that are not visited by cattle or sheep. According to the Wild Horse Commission, horses consume about 0.5% of Nevada's forage.

In some regions of the state horse herds may pose competition to cattle or sheep, but BLM officials say the ranchers' perceived threat is usually more psychological than real. In the ranchers' view, the horse is a creature imposed on them by Congress.

Sore Point With Ranchers

"When Congress passed the Wild Horse Act in 1971, the range had already been allocated for many years," the BLM's Frei said. "The rights were all divided. Then along comes the horse with rights of its own, and the ranchers never liked it."

Some wild horse supporters say they are confident that the BLM will solve the mystery of the killings and soon make arrests. If and when they do, BLM officials say the matter will not be handled as an everyday offense. The killing of each horse can carry a fine of \$2,000 and a jail sentence of up to a year. The charges will not be referred to local authorities but sent to the U.S. attorney, Steele said. "We will treat this as a crime of great significance," he said.