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Mass wild horse slayings remain mystery

Austin citizens split over who to suspect

By Doug McMillan/Gazette-Journal

AUSTIN — The shooting deaths of 268 wild horses north of this little mining town have its residents astir.

The isolated town, 160 miles east of Reno, seems evenly divided between those who think a rancher must be responsible and those who say no local rancher would do such a thing.

But whether they agree with the federal law protecting wild horses — and most people in Austin don't — most deplore what federal officials say is probably the largest mass slaying of wild horses since

"Congress passed the law in 1971.

"I think it's a crime," said Natalie Williams, a waitress at the Toiyabe Drive-in, the closest thing Austin has to a fast-food restaurant. "A lot of ranchers talk against wild horses. They see them eating their cattle's forage. But it's hard to imagine somebody being that cold-hearted."

An Elko helicopter pilot, returning from a job in Austin in early August, spotted the first group of 41 dead horses on the barren foothills of Mount Callaghan, a 10,190-foot peak looming out of the Toiyabe Range, 20 miles north of Austin.

After interviewing more than 100 locals, BLM investigators received a tip on a second group of 87 dead mustangs around Mount Moses, a 8,645-foot landmark 30 miles northwest of the initial discovery.

They found the last group of 140 carcasses a week ago about 10 miles north of the initial grisly find, during a helicopter search for more bodies.

The remains in all three cases appear to be at least 6 to 12 months old, BLM officials say. Most are bone piles, already starting to bleach in the sun.

The only other thing BLM officials will confirm is that the horses were shot — they have recovered rifle bullets. For now, they're treating the three groups of carcasses, scattered over 160 square miles, as separate cases, although they appear to be connected.

Few people in Austin are pointing fingers at their neighbors, but the "neighborhood" extends hundreds of square miles in every direction.

Astride a 7,300-foot pass through the

Toiyabe Range, Austin is 70 miles from the next town — Eureka — and about 100 miles from the nearest supermarkets or McDonald's in Fallon, to the west, or Battle Mountain, to the north.

In the intervening lonely miles, wild horses easily outnumber people.

Austin's population goes up and down with the boom-bust mining economy. A generous Lander County estimate credited it with 800 people at the peak of the most recent boom a few months ago, but it appears to be sliding back toward its average of 500 or so with the closure of the Inspiration Gold Mine south of town.

"It's amazing as small of a town as this is, we didn't hear whispers about it, because you can't so much as sneeze

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