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Mustangs dying on the range near Nellis Air Force Base

By Jane Gross/*NY Times*

Tonopah, NV-On a restricted missile range here, where the bleached carcasses of mustangs poke from the sagebrush, the Air Force, the Bureau of Land Management and a small band of wild-horse advocates have joined forces to save thousands of animals from dehydration and death.

Faced with five years of drought and a shrinking federal budget for wild-horse management, these unlikely allies are scrambling to keep Nellis Air Force Base, the home of the Stealth bomber, from becoming a mass graveyard.

They are fighting desperate odds. Since April, the Air Force has been trucking water to the horses, 10,000 gallons a day, and dumping it in dry creek beds, where only the strongest animals can muscle their way through the thirsty flank.

Some look like standing skeletons, all ribs and bulging eyes, as they gnaw each other's tails. Visitors to the range in recent weeks have seen horses topple and die.

The Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency that supervises millions of acres of public land in the West, has begun gathering up thousands of horses, the largest roundups here in two decades, and moving the animals from the withered, overgrazed range to an adoption center near Reno.

Goading these efforts are two wild-horse advocates in Reno, about 225 miles northeast of here, who have chosen to cooperate with government agencies rather than blame them. These women, Dawn Lappin and Cathy Barcomb, are also nursing the sickest colts back to health in their backyard corrals with Gatorade, intravenous antibiotics and comforting baby talk.

The emaciated mustangs on the Nellis range are part of the nations' largest and most neglected herd of wild horses and illustrate some of the failings of a 20-year federal program to protect and manage the animals that symbolize the

free spirit of the Wild West.

Like wild horses elsewhere, the herd here has been growing at the rate of nearly 20 percent a year since the passage in 1971 of the Wild Horse and Burro Act, which prohibited the capture, slaughter or sale of the animals.

The population of horses across ten Western states has grown from 34,000 to 50,000 in that time, with the Bureau of Land Management responsible from removing horses from individual herd sites when there is insufficient water or forage.

The herd at Nellis, one of the 110 sites in Nevada, has been managed less diligently than the others. It is more difficult to monitor the horses on a restricted military installation than on open range land, where bureau inspectors can come and go as they please.

And with no cattle sharing the land, there are no politically powerful ranchers to hound the beleaguered agency to thin the herd, which is a costly exercise.

"There are no good guys and bad guys here," said Michael J. Pontrelli, a wildlife biologist and consultant to the Air Force. "This has not been a managed range. It's got another agenda."

BLM officials conceded at a Senate subcommittee hearing last month and during a tour of the range last week that they had let the situation get out of hand at Nellis.

"We are trying to catch up," said Billy Templeton, the bureau's state director in Nevada, which is home to 80 percent of the nation's wild horses but receives only 18 percent of the \$13.7 million appropriated this year to manage the herds.

There is widespread, perhaps belated agreement that the Nellis range can support only 1,500 horses under current drought conditions, although more than 4,000 are here now. Horses need 10 to 16 gallons of water a day, experts say, and 20 to 25 pounds of forage. Both are scarce on these start 400,000 acres. *New York Times*