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Death toll mounts for wild horse population

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Both federal and state Environmental Protection Agency officials are looking into the deaths of 61 wild horses on the Nellis Air Force Test Range in Southern Nevada.

Late Monday Air Force officials announced they have discovered the carcasses of an additional 30 wild horses that died after drinking toxic water near a water fill station used by government subcontractors.

On Friday an Air Force spokesman told the Nevada Appeal that 31 wild horses had apparently died after drinking contaminated water from several small puddles near a water source located at the northwest section of the Nellis test range.

In a statement issued late Monday, Air Force Public Affairs

spokesman Lt. Robert Thompson said:

"A total of 61 wild horses have died on the ranges as a result of drinking contaminated water. An ongoing Air Force investigation has revealed that a Reynolds Electrical Engineering Company (REECO) contract employee rinsed out a truck containing between 600 and 1,000 pounds of urea, a commercial deicing agent. The resulting runoff water formed standing pools from which the wild horses drank.

"Urea is a chemical compound used as a roadway deicing agent and is not categorized as a dangerous substance.

Federal EPA officials from San Francisco said that while the substance was not likely to be considered a hazardous waste, it could be classed as a solid waste disposal

problem.

The official said both Nevada state and federal EPA officials will try to ensure similar occurrences do not happen again.

The chemical was used on the Air Force facilities located in the northwest section of the gunnery ranges.

REECO spokesman Steve Leon would not comment on the incident other than to say that REECO officials are also participating in an ongoing investigation of the deaths.

Air Force spokesman went on to say Air Force officials have now buried the surface soil where the runoff water was and that rock will be spread over the site to keep other horses away from the contaminated soil.

Air Force officials are continuing to monitor the situation closely, said the official.

Investigators from both the Bureau of Land Management and the Air Force have continued to comb the area surrounding the site looking for more dead wild horses and other animals.

BLM spokesman Maxine Shane said lab results received by both the BLM and the Air Force confirmed the horses died from ammonia toxicity after drinking from the contaminated puddles.

Shane said the BLM investigators are at the site today to determine if any improper action was taken by the REECO employees and to make sure the area is rendered safe.

According to one person who spoke on the condition that he not be identified, the deaths of the wild horses came about after the REECO employee washed out the back of a truck used to haul the deicing

agent.

He said that apparently several hundred pounds of the substance was flushed out in large pools, laced with the toxic agent, which formed near a water source frequented by horses.

Apparently the solution was so strong it killed many of the horses within minutes.

A BLM spokesman said that about 4,000 wild horses roam over the approximately 400,000 acres that make up both the Nellis gunnery range and the Tonopah Atomic Test Range.

In an unrelated incident, BLM officials have now confirmed that at least 50 more wild mustangs have been found shot near the Mt. Callaghan area of Lander County about 40 miles north of Austin.

BLM spokesman Bob Stewart said

this now brings to 507 the total number of wild horses found shot in the Lander County area.

BLM investigators have spent the last eight weeks searching the Austin area for the carcasses of wild horses after a helicopter pilot first reported finding the remains of 13 of the wild mustangs found shot to death near a water hole north of Austin.

While investigators have interviewed more than 200 people in gathering evidence on the shootings, no arrests have been made.

Nevada is the home of about 38,000 wild horses and burros that roam freely across much of the state.

Several wild horse humane groups along with the BLM have posted rewards totaling \$18,000 in connection with the Lander County shootings.