

Not at home on the range

Horses' needs outstrip Western resources

By Linda Kanamine
USA TODAY

Desperately thirsty wild horses on rangeland at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada paw at shallow mudholes, then fight over the water that collects in their hoof prints.

Even the military, which transports some 17,000 gallons of water daily to the drought-stricken range, can't keep up with the needs of nearly 5,000 starving horses.

"Nellis range is a hellhole for horses," Dave Catoore, a Utah cowboy who rounds up horses for the U.S. government, told a Senate subcommittee Thursday.

Rapidly multiplying wild horses and burros — now 50,000, up from 35,000 in 1971 — are causing havoc in Nevada, South Dakota, Wyoming and other Western states as they overeat fragile grasslands and chase cattle and wildlife from scarce water holes.

"They're doing damage that will

take decades to repair. They're literally eating themselves out of house and home," Bureau of Land Management Director Cy Jamison told the Appropriations subcommittee on interior agencies.

Indeed, colorful images of the wild West — of running mustangs with flowing manes — are becoming nightmares. Experts are divided on a solution. Possibilities:

► Adoption. But Jamison says his agency would have to remove up to 13,000 animals yearly to protect vital grazing land for cattle and wildlife. Now, adoptions, almost entirely by people living east of the Mississippi River, average just 4,000 per year.

► Birth control. John Grandy of the Humane Society of the United States says the best immediate step would be a contraceptive vaccination that is shot into horses and burros by darts from helicopters.

► Sanctuaries. Dayton Hyde, who runs a government-backed

sanctuary for unadoptable wild horses in South Dakota, says the daily cost is less than \$2 per horse on the 50,000-acre site. The BLM wants to shut his sanctuary and another in Oklahoma to save money.

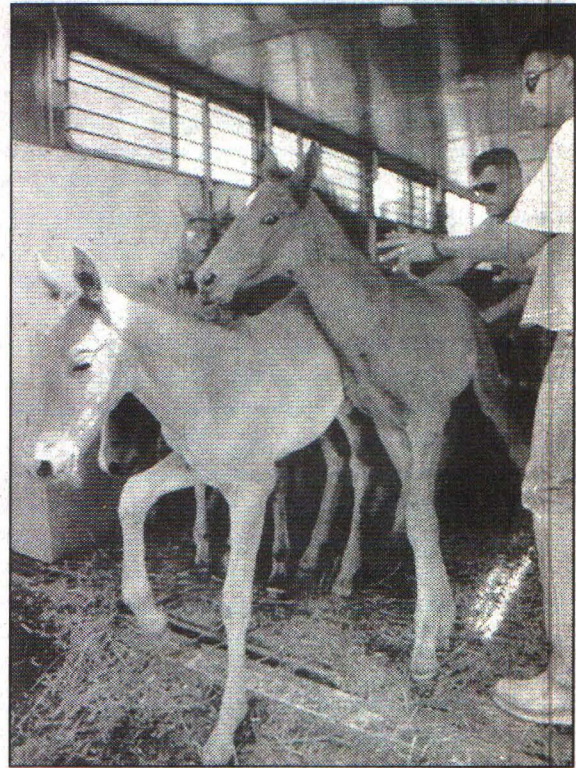
Wild populations have boomed since 1971, when Congress passed the Wild Horse and Burro Act to protect and manage the animals.

Since then, Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., says, the \$130 million effort has failed to lower populations despite adoption and sanctuary programs. Some animals also have been destroyed.

Now, "BLM is running out of money and the horses are running out of time," says Dawn Lappin of the Reno-based Wild Horse Organized Assistance.

Reid says he'll propose funding for birth control — and to keep the sanctuaries open.

"If we continue the way we are, it will be extremely bad for the people and the animals," he says.



By Tim Dunn, USA TODAY

SAVIORS: Marines Rafael Delgado, front, and S.I.K. Moertl deliver foals to a Reno stable. They volunteered to help round up the foals, abandoned while their mothers searched for water and food in Nevada.

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