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United States Wild Horse And Burro Foundation



Wild horses graze and water on the Nevada Test Site.

## Red tape saddles efforts to help horses find water

By Ed Dodrill  
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Six months after 61 thirsty horses died after drinking a toxic chemical in a desperate search for water on the Nevada Test Site, nothing has been done to improve their water sources.

Last November, a Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Co. employee washed a chemical — urea — from a truck, creating a pool of toxic water. Horses on the test site, which have lost a number of their traditional watering holes, drank the poisoned water and died.

In January, REECo agreed to pay a \$15,000 fine and provide watering spots for the horses, but red tape is keeping the horses high and dry.

The 61 horses that died were in a populated area where horses seldom were seen. However, because traditional water sources have dried up, the horses are venturing close to inhabited areas in search of water.

The agreement, which apparently eliminated criminal charges against REECo, also called for that company to develop three new springs from which the horses may get water. The \$15,000 fine is to be paid to the Nevada Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses.

While the company has issued rules to prevent the dumping of toxic chemicals where horses could be endangered, their efforts to get the horses adequate water are tied up in bureaucratic red tape.

Steve Leon, who fields media inquiries for REECo, said the Nellis Range Complex Five Party Group, made up of users of the

facility, is preparing a study to determine what springs should be opened. Eyed are Silver Bowl, Tunnel and Cliff Springs.

However, after that is determined for certain, an environmental impact assessment of the proposal would have to be prepared and approved before work could be done.

Teri Jay of the Nevada Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses said there is enough water at existing water holes for the horses. However, since the incident there has not been anyone on the test facility to do an evaluation of the horse's water supply. Jay said the agreement between REECo, the BLM, and her agency is still awaiting court approval.

In the meantime, the \$15,000 has not been paid and no work has been done on the springs. Jay said the money will not be used to improve water or feed conditions for the horses, but will be added to a fund used to issue grants.

Lew Dodgin, of the state's Environmental Protection Agency, said the agreement between the state and REECo is expected to be presented to the state court in Tonopah within a few weeks. He said he expected court approval of the stipulated disposal of the case and terms of the agreement call for completion of the watering hole project within a year of the judge's signing. The money is to be paid upon approval by the judge.

The original watering holes were dug and piped by members of the National Wild Horse Association many years ago. However, security restrictions prevented them from returning to the site each year to repair the

damage of erosion, time and natural changes in the flow of underground springs.

Stan Wilkerson of the BLM — the federal agency saddled with responsibility of the wild horses — admitted even BLM employees have problems getting on the range.

"It's a closed area and we have procedures we have to go through," he said. He also said members of the wild horse group have not been allowed on the site since the horses died last November.

He said nobody from the BLM has been on the test site range to check on the welfare of the horses since the horses died last November, but a range specialist has been there to survey the range.

He said there have been no roundups on the test site for more than two years. While exact numbers are not known, he is certain the number of horses on the range is well above the 2,000 head the range can support. That figure was determined several years ago.

However, Wilkerson said the recent study by a BLM range management specialist, revealed conditions are "not good." He pointed out that rainfall has been sparse and the increased number of horses compounds the problem.

He said the BLM plans to take a census this spring to determine the actual horse population on the facility.

A lawsuit by the Animal Protection Institute has halted all but emergency roundups of wild horses in the West.

Wilkerson said, "If horses were dying up there we would know about it," but neither Wilkerson nor Leon could say where the horses were finding water.