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Appeal photo by Jennifer Whitehair

Wild horses huddle together in corrals at the Bureau of Land Management's horse facility in Palomino Valley this week. BLM officials and area horselovers are working to help save

the drought-stricken animals which are dying on the Nevada ranges from starvation and dehydration. Baby foals, abandoned by their starving mothers, are available for adoption.

Horse lovers and officials try to save wild foals

By JENNIFER WHITEHAIR
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the animals that have become a strong symbol of the West.

The walk is dry and dusty. The scarce desert grasses are nearly gone.

It is a 15-20 mile walk between patches of forage and the little bit of water in the mud around almost-dry springs.

The animals walk relentlessly between the mudholes and the feed until exhaustion forces them to drop and predators overtake them.

It is a walk that is killing Nevada's wild horses.

But in a statewide effort to stymie the cycle of death, area horse lovers and federal officials with the Bureau of Land management are taking steps to save

The Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses has taken over care of wild foals that have been abandoned by their drought-stricken mothers, while the BLM continues to take adult horses from the range and place the animals into adoption centers in Northern Nevada.

"Each week, it seems like the ones coming off (the range) are getting worse and worse," says Cathy Barcomb, director of the Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses.

Streams and pools normally full on the 300,000-acre wild horse range at Nellis Air Force range near Las Vegas have been dried up by the drought.

Air Force officials are hauling 17,000 gallons of water a day just to keep the deteriorated wild horses alive.

But hauling water does not solve all of the horses' problems.

The horses are still forced to walk more than 15 miles between water and suitable forage.

It has become survival of the fittest in the harsh desert conditions.

The strongest male horses keep the weaker males and females away from the muddy bogs where the animals drink out of the indentations in the mud left by their hooves.

Slowly, the weak animals die of starvation and dehydration.

In this survival walk, many young foals are unable to keep

up the pace and are abandoned by their mothers.

The BLM collects the foals and brings them to the Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses for care.

Danny, a young foal who was brought in three weeks ago, nearly died on the trip up to Reno.

Barcomb said the group was forced to stop in Tonopah and rush Danny to the local hospital because his condition was so extreme.

At the hospital, nurses rushed to save Danny from death. The baby horse was suffering from severe dehydration and starvation.

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Horses

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"They had to tie his leg off, get a vein pumped up and put in an intravenous," Barcomb said.

Danny's fight for survival was only beginning.

Intravenous solution kept Danny alive for the trip, but shortly after arriving at the commission's facilities in Washoe Valley, Danny was stricken with pneumonia.

But three weeks later, little Danny is on the road back to health, but more foals continue to arrive each day needing medical care.

Two foals at the facility can barely walk. They have literally worn their hooves off during their painful 15-mile treks from water to food on the Nellis range.

Other horses are mauled by coyotes when they became too weak to stand.

"They must have been down, and they were chewed alive," Barcomb said.

Despite the destruction that has ravaged these foals, only four out of the 194 transported here have died.

Barcomb said the numbers would have been far more tragic if her group, along with federal officials, had not taken action.

"All the babies would have been dead if we had not done a gather," Barcomb said.

Foals are not the only victims of the drought.

According to Fred Wyatt, the assistant district manager of the BLM's Palomino Valley Wild

Horse and Burro Placement Center, mares are also being ravaged by the drought.

"The mares will stay with the colts until they don't make it," Wyatt said.

Wyatt predicts that a total of approximately 2,000 horses will be shipped off of the Nellis range into holding corrals and adoption centers.

Some 1,408 have already been shipped.

After the first 2,000 are transported off the range, BLM officials will conduct an evaluation to determine how many wild horses the drought-ravaged range can continue to support.

Nevada has more than 80 percent of the nation's 50,000 estimated wild horses, but federal officials have been unable to control the 20 percent annual growth in their population.

"Now, there are more horses on the range than it can support," Wyatt said.

"There's not enough forage and natural water to accommodate them."

Wyatt said the assistance of the wild horse commission with the foals has allowed the Palomino Valley facility the time to medicate the older horses.

"They saved our bacon helping out," Wyatt said of the commission's efforts.

Saving the foals requires hours of work.

Barcomb and other volunteers spend hours feeding and treating the foals.

Some are so young, they must be bottle-fed and all need a spe-



Appeal photo by Jennifer Whitehair

VOLUNTEER GINNY ORCUT feeds a baby foal at a facility in Washoe Valley operated by the Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses. The foals have been abandoned by their wild mothers due to harsh drought conditions on the range.

cial baby formula.

Barcomb estimates that thousands of dollars have already been spent on mare's milk to this date.

For Barcomb, all the time and effort is worth it.

Volunteers at the commission's facility feel the same way.

"If I could take them all home

I would," Ginny Orcutt, a volunteer, said.

When the horses have returned to health, they are put up for adoption.

Each Sunday, the commission sponsors adoptions for the foals.

Adoptions for adult horses are conducted through the Palomino Valley facility.