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Big wild horse herd faces death on Air Force range

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Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Beneath the sprawling air range where military fighter jets scream over in daily mock battles, thousands of wild horses face a real life struggle to survive on the barren desert floor.

Years of neglect, continuing drought, severe overgrazing and a court fight have combined to threaten the existence of perhaps the largest remaining wild horse herd in the country.

Carcasses of dead horses litter the landscape, say those who have been allowed on the Nellis Air Force Base test range. Stallions battle over the little water remaining in mudholes, while mares abandon their foals in desperate searches for water.

Up to 6,000 horses roam the range, which stretches north of Las Vegas nearly to the central Nevada town of Tonopah, some 200 miles away. Experts say the range has enough water and forage for maybe 2,000 of the animals.

"It's just devastating, just an awful sight to see," said Karen Lewallen, a wild horse advocate who visited the range last month.

In a stopgap effort to save the herd, Nellis officials truck in 10,000 gallons of water a day. Horses that would normally run at the sight of man instead run after the trucks. Some even lap at the water as it's poured from the tankers.

"The ones still strong enough were fighting each other as the water was coming out of the truck," said Lewallen, a member of the National Wild Horse Association.

Some of the horses, though, are getting a reprieve.

The Bureau of Land Manage-

ment is removing up to 2,000 of the horses in an effort to reduce the size of the herd to liveable levels.

Contractors are rounding the horses into pens, then trucking them to a ranch near Reno, where many will be processed for eventual adoption at \$125 a head and new lives as ranch animals or riding horses.

"Most are broken to ride," said Pete Christensen, an assistant BLM manager in Nevada. "Most any use you can make of a horse, they get used for."

The horses, descendants of horses turned loose by ranchers and the military over the years, are part of an estimated 50,000 that roam different areas of the West.

The herds have been steadily growing since federal legislation in 1971 prohibited the capture, sale or slaughter of the horses. The legislation left the BLM responsible for removing the animals from overpopulated or drought-ravaged areas.

The Nellis herd, though, has been managed less attentively than others, partly because the Air Force restricts activity on the huge range, where fighter pilots hone their skills in daily mock dogfights.

A lawsuit filed by the Animal Protection Institute in 1987 to stop captures in several areas also stopped some planned removals, although the BLM took out 600 horses in an emergency capture in 1989. The API argued that captures were being done mainly to aid cattle ranchers in most parts of the state and that the horses should be allowed to thin or add to their ranks naturally.