



Photograph obtained by video footage taken by Lynn Hanson

Photo on the left: from observer Lynn Hanson: "What you're seeing is only two minutes of the constant chaos and scrambling that occurs throughout the day. Before these horses even got into my view, they had been pursued and pushed from 7 miles away... they've been chased for hours to get to this point. They're confused and running fast, in the heat. They are terrified and traumatized and the legs and hooves of so many week-old foals, if they make it, will be forever be damaged. Every animal is in distress."

There were 2 helicopters used, the other is just behind this hill pushing the horses over it, while the helicopter in view is stopping the horses from moving forward.

Photo on the right: Tiny foals are chased



Photograph obtained by video footage taken by Lynn Hanson

Horse roundup kicking up controversy in Wyoming

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CASPER — The North Lander Wild Horse Complex, which sweeps through Fremont County from the Owl Creek mountains down the Wind River Range to the Sweetwater River in the south, is Wyoming's largest collective herd management area, and home to thousands of wild horses from the stunning chestnut paints of the Muskrat Basin to the grays of Conant Creek.

They have no natural predators out in the sagebrush sea — unless you count a pair of helicopters.

On July 1, the Bureau of Land Management set out on one of the largest Wyoming roundups in recent memory, aiming to corral and remove 2,715 horses and reduce the state's biggest herds by as much as 90%. The combined herd area is home to 3,035 horses.

If all goes according to plan, there will be 320 remaining by the end of the month.

It's Wyoming's first action on wild horses since the bait trap gather of the McCullough peaks herd in March, which became mired in scandal after the demise of a yearling that advocates called the result of "gross negligence."

Under high scrutiny, the BLM has been on its best behavior in Fremont County, according to civilian monitors who told the Star-Tribune that helicopter pilots had strictly observed the Comprehensive Animal Welfare protocol, including driving horses at safe speeds and distances.

The roundup has broached deeper controversies and raised questions over how the agency determines the size of the herd, currently set at 320-530 horses.

According to BLM Wyoming, if left unchecked, these herds will irreparably damage important resources and fragile ecosystems, putting one of the nation's largest swaths of priority sage-grouse habitat, along with vital mule deer and pronghorn range, at risk.

"We brought a lot of research to this, and we do see the degradation of the range lands and degradation to the other wildlife because of the overpopulated herds," said Mickey Fisher, an information officer with the BLM. "It disrupts the ecological balance on public lands by overgrazing the vegetation and competing for water sources, especially during a drought. And because they have no natural predators, it compounds the overpopulation issue."

'Cow-blindness'

And yet there are notable gaps in the data.

The agency is required to conduct rangeland health assessments every 10 years. These analyses take measures of things like native and invasive species, as well as drought and land degradation.

However, assessments are chronically backlogged, and opponents believe they tilt policy to the favor of other animals with more political sway: livestock. There are six livestock allotments that overlap with the North Lander Herd Management Area.

One of those allotments currently meets the agency's land health standard, while the other five don't have up-to-date evaluations. BLM currently permits 49,288 head of cattle on these allotments, and some believe that horses are being scapegoated for degradation caused by livestock.

Chandra Rosenthal, director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a conservation organization, said the agency's own records indicate that cattle are the overriding cause of land degradation in the West.

"The BLM has a fixation with wild horses, but these roundups are an example of misplaced priorities. We need a balanced approach that addresses the primary costs of land degradation, and the BLM needs to confront the impact of livestock head on," said Chandra Rosenthal, who believes the agency is suffering from a willful "cow-blindness."

"Effective land management must be driven by the data, not politics," she said.

Data analyzed by her group shows that through the end of 2023, over 44 million acres of public rangelands are failing the BLM's minimum land health standards, and more than two-thirds of that acreage is failing is due solely to livestock overgrazing, agency documents show, but less than 1% of those failing acres are the result of wild horses.

BLM Wyoming counters that even without official land health inventories, field officers have a strong sense of rangeland conditions and causes.

Fisher said not all land degradation is equal, and explains that cattle impacts are less serious and easier to manage.

"Wild horses are out there all year long, constantly compounding and overpopulating. Whereas with cattle and sheep, we control those rotations. We can even rotate them through the region and through different sections on a seasonal basis. That allows us to ensure there's no serious, long-term degradation of the rangeland. If we see evidence that cattle and livestock are causing a larger degradation than wild horses, then we can respond to it," he said.

Genetic viability

Also at stake is the herds' genetic viability, and advocates are concerned that this gather will undermine the herds' resilience to disease and environmental pressure by removing diversity from the gene pool.

Research from the Equine Blood Typing Laboratory at the University of Kentucky determined that wild horse herds need a minimum of 150 to 200 animals with at least 100 breeding age animals in order to maintain genetic viability, which provides enough gene diversity to sustain a population through setbacks like viral infections.

With a target population of 320, the North Lander Complex might meet that threshold, but the problem is that the area includes four separate herds that do not genetically co-mingle, Brown and others say.

Conant Creek, Dishpan Butte, Muskrat Basin and Rock Creek Mountain herd areas are separated by geologic features and fourstrand, barbed-wire fencing. The problem is especially concerning for the Dishpan Butte herd.

An environmental assessment of the North Lander Herd Management Area conducted by the BLM in 2012 included research from equine geneticist Gus Cothran who said the "herd has low variation and should be monitored closely."

It's set to have 60-100 horses, even while it is the only herd territory currently meeting the BLM's healthy rangeland standard.

"There's no interaction between the herds that I've ever seen," said Jim Brown, a professional wildlife photographer who grew up in Riverton and has observed the herds since the 1970s. "So I asked the BLM to provide evidence that these horses intermingle or intercross, and they don't have it and won't provide anything [to validate herd interaction]. I think it's an outright lie."

The agency said it's keeping tabs on diversity by testing the genetic material of horse hair follicles. If gene pools dwindle too much, they introduce specimens from outside herds.

"We're constantly assessing and analyzing genetic diversity in all the wild horses on all the different ranges. It isn't something we overlooked," Fisher said.

True wild herd

The North Lander animals have vastly surpassed the preferred AML in part because of the size of their territory and because they, unlike other wild horse herds, are unaccustomed to human presence, making methods like fertility darting and precision gathers unfeasible.

In the eyes of advocates, the herds' unbroken bonafides are more reason to protect their population.

"This North Lander herd is a true wild herd, one of the last herds in the United States that you can actually say are wild, wild horses. You're lucky to get within a mile of them before they run off," said Brown, who monitored the roundup as a civilian.

As of day five of the gather, the agency has collected 598 horses, including 245 stallions, 245 mares and 108 foals. It has shipped 557 of them to its long-term off-range Wheatland corral, where they are being prepared for adoption.

For most, this will be their final destination.

Wild horses are highly social and live in what equine scientists refer to as "multi-level societies" with complex kinship arrangements and social roles. And for some observers, it's what makes roundups like these especially hard.

Chad Hanson, Casper resident and civilian observer, explained it this way:

"Viewers were not allowed to observe the management activities that took place in the sorting pen, but even at a distance of half a mile, we could hear the horses screaming as they were separated from their families," he said. "That is a sound that I will not forget."