

APNewsBreak: BLM says survey confirms horse claims

By SCOTT SONNER (AP) – 5 days ago

RENO, Nev. — Faced with legal challenges accusing the government of rounding up too many wild horses in the West, federal land managers released a new aerial survey Friday, claiming it confirms that they left as many mustangs as they intended after a contentious roundup last winter.

Horse protection advocates complained their own surveys had found nowhere near the 900 mustangs the Bureau of Land Management said it intended to leave on the range when it removed nearly 2,000 of the animals from the Calico mountains about 200 miles north of Reno.

But a new census from an aerial survey the BLM conducted during the last half of June found 1,141 mustangs in the five management areas that make up the Calico complex. The complex covers an area from just north of Gerlach, about 35 miles wide, running 50 miles north to the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge on the Nevada-Oregon line.

The larger overall survey found 4,217 horses in 13 horse management areas in parts of Nevada, California and Oregon.

"We are pleased to get this larger survey because it does reinforce the census and the information we have used in the past to guide our management of these areas," BLM spokeswoman Jo Lynn Worley told The Associated Press.

Worley said BLM expected to find a minimum of the 600 horses it was required to leave on the range in the Calico complex. A second survey of the same area is planned in the fall.

A number of advocacy groups that have filed lawsuits in the past to try to block roundups that the BLM says are necessary because the wild horse population is growing so rapidly that the animals are running out of food and damaging the range.

In Defense of Animals lost a legal bid to block the Calico roundup in federal court earlier this year. Lawyers for that group said last month they intend to sue over a roundup of about 2,000 and burros planned later this summer in the Twin Peaks area of northeast California.

On Friday, In Defense of Animals joined ecologist Craig Downer in filing an appeal with the Interior Board of Land Appeals to try to block a separate roundup the BLM was scheduled to begin by the end of this week in northeast Nevada. The appeal asks for a stay of BLM's plans to remove up to 1,200 wild horses and leave behind 337 mustangs at what it calls the Owyhee complex, three management areas covering 750 square miles north of Elko.

The appeal says the roundup should be postponed until after Aug. 15 because it is too close to the end of the peak foaling season on June 30, unnecessarily subjecting the young to life-threatening conditions including the "helicopter-created chase, or stampede, of horses for miles over rugged terrain in desert summer temperatures."

"We continue to ask for a freeze on roundups so BLM isn't relying on census after the fact to confirm they haven't wiped out American herds," said Ginger Kathrens, executive director of the horse advocacy group Cloud Foundation based in Colorado Springs, Colo. "BLM needs to commit some of their budget on scientific range monitoring and accurate censusing before they conduct these incredibly expensive roundups and removals."

The BLM estimates there currently are 38,400 wild horses and burros in 10 Western states — about 12,000 more than what it describes as the legally "appropriate management level." Between 16,000 and 17,000 are in Nevada.

Elsewhere in Nevada, activists with the financial backing of Madeleine Pickens and others were hoping to buy all 174 horses up for sale at a state-sanctioned auction on Saturday to prevent them from going to the slaughterhouse. Nevada Department of Agriculture officials praised the move, saying the estray horses up for auction in Fallon are separate from and not subject to the federal protections afforded wild-roaming horses. The horses are believed to be strays or descendants of horses abandoned by private owners over the years in Pilot Valley north of West Wendover near the Utah line.

Pickens is the wife of oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens.

Associated Press writer Martin Griffith contributed to this report.