

A Look At The History Of Mismanagement Of The Nevada Mustang

Not long ago, George Parman had an article printed in several newspapers around the state calling attention to the ongoing mismanagement of wild horses. From what I have been hearing, it's caused quite a stir. It seems that a lot of people don't want to hear the truth. And the truth is, when government takes control, it nearly always makes things worse - not better. And that is precisely what has happened. Things have gotten steadily worse, year after year, decade after decade - rangelands degraded and overrun with wild horses - horses starving for lack of feed - water holes and troughs left unattended - all in the name of protecting the wild mustang.

We need to remember, the whole thing started when Wild Horse Annie began accusing the old time mustangers and ranchers of abusing the horses they were capturing. And on it went, until she and others had the whole nation stirred up. But I have to ask, was there anyone prosecuted for the alleged abuse that was supposedly going on? No! Was it ever proven that there was excessive abuse going on? No! The truth is, there was no abuse as was claimed back at that time.

It's true, when the old timers were gathering horses, there were cripples and older horses that had to be put down from time to time - not a whole lot different than it is today when it is the government that does the gathering of horses. Except of course, the suffering that now occurs before the gathers are made, and after the animals are captured is far greater than it was back then. And that's what I want to talk about. Over the years, I've kept track of some of the suffering that has gone on - not all of course, for I'm sure a lot has been covered up. And I'm not certain as to what all has gone on in other states. But what I have a record of, I am presenting here. Which to me, shows clearly that we should be doing something to stop the abuse that has been ongoing for so long now. (Below are summaries of some of the debacles that have occurred since the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act was passed in 1971.)

The first indication of just how bad things were to be for the horses, occurred in 1974, when Willard Phillips, area manager for the BLM found horses dead from starvation on range near Burns, Oregon. "They eat up the grass and the brush and when they can find nothing else, they eat the hair off one another's manes before they die," Phillips stated.

In 1977, horses were found dying of thirst on the Owyhee Desert in southern Idaho. A two year drought dried up many water holes, and hundreds of horses were left with nothing but mud for moisture. Many young foals died after being mired in the deep mud while trying to suck moisture. Some were trampled in the mud by older horses crowding in for moisture.

During the winter of 1977 and 78, many more horses were lost, some in Montana, some in Nevada and some in California. In the spring, more than 270 horses were found to have died in the Buffalo Hills near Winnemucca.

In 1987, 48 wild horses died soon after experiments were conducted in an attempt to develop birth control methods by the University of Minnesota. The horses were driven by helicopter miles from their normal range, fitted with collars, then left to fend for themselves. Many of the horses died of dehydration after being unable to find water. Others were killed as they grew and were choked by the tight-fitting collars.

A year later, in 1988, another eight horses died in Stone Cabin Valley, east of Tonopah, as a result of tight fitting collars put around horses' necks as part of continuing birth control experiments conducted by the University of Minnesota.

In 1987, the Animal Protection Institute sued the federal government claiming that the Bureau of Land Management was removing horses from the range at too fast a rate. The BLM stopped removing horses from the range including the Nellis Air Force Base test range.

In 1991, it was reported that dead horse carcasses littered the landscape on the Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range north of Las Vegas. Many horses found still living were in such bad shape they hardly had strength to fight for territorial rights over withering water holes. Later, more than 2000 wild horses were removed from the area. Many were near death for lack of food and water. Another 200 colts, abandoned by their mothers who were unable to fend for themselves, much less care for their offspring were put up for adoption. No mention was made as to the number of animals that either choked to death or starved during that period.

In 1992, an emergency roundup was undertaken to save a herd of wild horses from dying of thirst in the little Owyhee area north of Winnemucca. No information was given regarding the condition of the range or animals found within the vicinity.

During the winter of 1991 and 92, horses were dying throughout much of the northern half of Eureka County, the northern part of White Pine County, and the eastern half of Elko County. Estimates by ranchers familiar with the area believe that 50% of the wild horses died in that area that winter. Elko BLM personnel acknowledged that by their count, within the Wells Resource Area, there were 47% fewer horses in the spring of 1992, than there had been the fall before.

In 1994, three feral mares were found dead in close proximity of a water trough north of Bald Mountain Mine in White Pine County. A passer by blamed the Bureau of Land Management for the deaths. He said he could not identify himself because he lives at the mercy of those federal agents. He explained the allotment had been used in the past, but the permittee had not turned cattle out that year. Workers from Bald Mountain Mine brought in a water truck to fill the trough so that the remaining animal would have water as needed.

In 2007, 185 horses died either during a gather or soon after reaching the wild horse facility at Palomino Valley after citizens made officials aware that horses were starving

for feed and water at Jackson Mountain north of Winnemucca. No investigation was made regarding the cause of the catastrophe. Nor was there any attempt made to determine the number of animals that died before the horses were gathered.

In 2010, complaints were made by wild horse groups, because several horses died during the gathering of horses in Surprise Valley, north of Reno. BLM officials said the roundup was necessary because an over-population of mustangs is harming native wildlife and the range itself, and threatening the horses with starvation.

And so, on and on it goes, month after month, year after year, with no end in sight. At any given time, if a person wants to, they can travel throughout Nevada and other parts of the west and find places where thousands of acres of land have been ravaged by wild horses - where ranching families have not taken use within their allotments for years because every bit of feed has been used by horses - where, white sage flats are often eaten off to such a degree that you can no longer tell white sage once grow there - where, the majority of winter feed is often used before winter even arrives - where, on any given year, if a hard winter is to come, there will be hundreds of horses die because they cannot find enough to eat - not to mention, the harm that is caused to wildlife, or the injustice of it all to those who live near and make their living from the lands.

No, I would say, that in truth, there probably has never been an act ever passed by congress that has resulted in more suffering by animals than the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971. And in terms of the harm it's done to a good many ranching families, it is probably one of the most unjust acts ever passed as well.

I have often wondered, why is it, when individuals are the cause of animal abuse they are prosecuted to the full extent of the law, yet when government does it, there is not even an investigation. Why has the United States become a nation where government is loved while individuals are hated? Where is the common sense - where is the justice?

Cliff Gardner, Ruby Valley, Nev. 2 / 5 / 10