



Nevada's Virginia Range Horses: Wild Horse "Advocates" Fail Miserably at Management

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Pictured above are Virginia Range horses decimating the protected bird nesting area of Washoe Lake State Park, which is off-limits to humans for the majority of the year.

The Virginia Range horses are a herd of feral and stray horses near Reno and Virginia City, Nevada. They differ from most "wild" horses because they are under the jurisdiction of the Nevada Department of Agriculture (NDA). Most wild horses are managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), but a 1986 BLM land planning decision declared this herd of wild horses free by the BLM. According to the NDA, "as a result of this declaration, the Virginia Range horses have been designated as stray/feral livestock because they are not within a BLM herd management area."

As a result, the Virginia Range horses involve a unique set of circumstances and management challenges. Their management has historically been funded by Nevada's agriculture enforcement division, which is funded by fees paid by Nevada livestock producers. Unlike federally managed horses, the Virginia Range horses can be gathered and sold at auction without limitation. However, the ability to utilize this option has been stifled by a limited budget, and by the predictable complaints from wild horse aficionados.

These issues led the NDA to enter into a series of cooperative management agreements with the American Wild Horse Campaign (AWHC) and Wild Horse Connection (WHC), beginning in 2013. Both groups are notorious animal rights extremist groups bent on fund raising vs correct and humane horse management.

Under the terms of these agreements, the groups are allowed to offer gathered horses for adoption, provide diversionary feeding meant to keep horses out of residential suburban areas, and administer fertility control.

Even with these measures in place, the total population of the Virginia Range herds is now estimated to be between 3500 to 5000. The appropriate management level (AML) is 300 to 600, as determined by a range inventory report by the NDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Virginia Range Wildlife Protection Association.

The numbers don't lie. Despite much grandstanding and fundraising surrounding their "management" of the Virginia Range horses, the wild horse groups' efforts aren't significantly reducing the population.

In 2017, wild horse advocacy groups were even offered the chance to assume complete ownership and control of the Virginia Range horses. Given such a prime opportunity to truly put their money where their mouths are, the groups were unwilling to assume total responsibility and refused the offer. The result has been that, while the groups run lucrative fundraising campaigns in the name of the Virginia Range horses, the state of Nevada is still ultimately responsible for the animals—yet their options for management are limited.

The horses' drastic overpopulation does great harm to the land and its resources, including protected bird nesting areas of the Washoe Lake State Park. The public is not allowed in the bird nesting areas of the park from February to September each year. Somehow, though, the utter decimation of these areas by the horses has been ignored.

Aside from such blatant, irreversible environmental damage, the horses' continued proximity to residential suburban areas and main highways makes them a significant problem for horse owners, property owners, and travelers.

With scarce water and their range depleted of feed, the horses crowd into residential areas, busting down fences, trampling lawns, and spreading sickness to domestic horses. Most recently, outbreaks of pigeon fever and equine distemper, widely known as stranglers, have plagued domestic horses in Washoe Valley. Frustrated residents are faced with bills for repairing their damaged property as well as bills for the veterinarian care of sick horses, with no course for reimbursement, even while the wild horse groups rake in donations.

The horses are also a safety hazard for travelers; according to the Nevada Department of Transportation, within a mere three-year period (2017 to 2019) there were a total of 240 horse-related vehicle accidents and 45 of those resulted in human injury and one resulted in human death.

The current Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for cooperative management was signed by WHC's Corenna Vance. The group works with AWHC; this group has been attempting fertility control with PZP, administered by volunteers. The AWHC website brags that it is the largest fertility control program for wild horses in the world, with approximately 1900 mares treated. While the total number of foals born to Virginia Range mares has indeed declined, PZP must be administered regularly to have continued fertility control. Considering that horses can easily live 20 years or more it will be easy for populations to continue to grow and does absolutely nothing to minimize the ongoing damage being done to the land, native wildlife, private property, and domestic animals. The horse population is 10 times what it should be currently.

On the surface, AWHC's PZP effort may seem like just a feel-good publicity stunt and fundraising mechanism. However, there is a hidden agenda. Insiders say that the AWHC is trying to demonstrate that their attempts at fertility control are definitive proof that wild horse herds across the west could be managed this way. These groups are trying to show that the helicopters necessary for many gathers should be completely outlawed, touting PZP as the answer instead.

What these groups fail to share publicly is that the Virginia Range horses differ greatly from most wild horse herds. The Virginia Range horses are both well accustomed to people and live in a limited, relatively contained area where they can be accessed by the volunteer PZP crew. This makes them a poor example for this type of program in other wild herds since the vast majority of wild horse herds live on HMA's that span millions of acres of tough western landscapes. Is this just another example of extremist groups taking advantage of misinformation to fundraise? We say yes.