

Wild horse advocates granted concession

By CBS-San Francisco

Nevada has signed a cooperative agreement with wild horse protection advocates allowing longtime critics of mustang roundups to have the first chance at purchasing state-captured animals that otherwise might end up at the slaughterhouse.

The agreement between Nevada's Department of Agriculture and California-based Return to Freedom Inc. doesn't affect the roundup of federally protected horses on mostly U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands in Nevada and much of the West. But it means that in at least three Northern Nevada counties, the mustang's allies won't have to outbid slaughterhouse buyers at state-sponsored auctions, as they were forced to do this year when dozens of horses were offered for sale.

Instead, the group that serves as the parent organization for the national American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign will have two business days to pay \$100 per horse for those the state gathers due to threats they pose on state roads and highways in the Virginia Range southeast of Reno, the municipality of Carson City and surrounding Washoe, Storey and Lyon counties.

Members of the national coalition who have been pressing for such an agreement say it's a significant development – the only one of its kind in the country.

"We are extremely proud of this important step toward preventing Nevada's iconic wild horses from falling into the clutches of kill-buyers at auction," said Kevin O'Neill, a senior legislative director for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Neda DeMayo, president and founder of the nonprofit Return to Freedom that provides refuge to 400 wild horses at a refuge in Lompoc is hopeful the agreement will lead to long-term changes that include more emphasis on trying to keep the animals running wild on the range through alternative management.

“A host of solutions – including birth control, fencing and diversionary feeding and watering – are available to mitigate public safety concerns,” she said.

Deputy Nevada Attorney General Dennis Belcourt signed the agreement on behalf of the Agriculture Department on Tuesday.

The deal forbids purchasers of the horses from returning them to the Virginia Range. Department spokesman Ed Foster said the arrangement places responsibility for care of the animals in the hands of advocacy groups.

“They are going to be interacting with the local horse groups and start facilitating that for us. We think it is a very productive step to have horse people working with other horse people,” he said.

With financial backing from the national groups, local advocates spent about \$10,000 to buy 41 state-owned horses at an auction in Fallon in January.

“This is a real opportunity to build on this first step and implement a win-win program that will benefit Nevada taxpayers, northern Nevada residents who enjoy the wild horses of the Virginia Range, and the horses themselves,” said Shannon Windle, a leader of the Hidden Valley Wild Horse Protection Fund in Reno who wrote a check for more than \$7,000 for 29 of those horses earlier this year.

The stray horses in the foothills between Reno and Virginia City aren't federally protected because the BLM determined long ago there were no wild herds on federal land in that area when Congress passed the Free-Roaming Wild Horse and Bureau

Act in 1971. Instead, these “feral” or “estrays” horses are considered property of the state.

Nevada officials believe about 2,500 of the animals are on private and state lands near Virginia City. More than three dozen have been hit since summer on three rural highways in Lyon and Storey counties around Silver Springs and Virginia City.

“We don’t do roundups,” Foster said. “The only time we pick up horses is when there is a public safety issue.”

Last year, the state removed about 60 horses from the range. This year, more than 100 have been collected, Foster said.

He said consecutive dry winters have forced them out of the upper elevations due to lack of water, and the state agency doesn’t have the resources for longer-term management plans.

“We don’t have staff, we don’t have time,” he said. “We’ve got 70 divisions and in our horse program, we’ve got one dude working it with a trailer and a truck, and we can barely put gas in the truck.”