

BLM recommends reducing wild horse herd

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BILLINGS, Mont. – A wild horse herd along the Montana-Wyoming border that traces its ancestry to the mounts ridden by Spanish conquistadors could be reduced through adoption by more than 35 percent, under recommendations released Monday by federal officials.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management says a decade-long drought – coupled with overgrazing by the herd – is severely degrading portions of the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range near Lovell, Wyo.

To reverse that trend, BLM officials in a new study recommended reducing the herd through adoption to as few as 92 adult horses. The herd currently numbers 143 adults and several dozen foals.

“There's definitely drought, but having too many horses during drought years magnifies the situation,” said BLM wild horse specialist Jared Bybee. Wild horse advocates warn that shrinking the herd so drastically would be disastrous. They say it could end up ruining one of the most genetically pure herds of Spanish colonial horses in the country.

“It's worth saving them. They're a special group of horses,” said John Nickle, president of the Pryor Mountain Wild Mustang Center in Lovell. He said the BLM instead should work toward improving the health of the range and expanding it if needed to accommodate more horses.

However, Wyoming state wildlife officials and at least one conservation group support the idea of a smaller herd, saying that would allow the range to recover.

Created in 1968, the Pryor Mountain horse range was the second horse preserve in the nation. It was formed at a time when the capture and slaughter of wild horses for profit faced rising criticism, culminating three years later in the federal Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act.

Genetic testing has shown the Pryor herd descends from horses used by Spanish conquistadors during their drive to colonize the American Southwest, according to Mustang Center director Matt Dillon. The first to arrive in the Pryors were likely brought by Crow or Shoshone Indians in the late 1700s or early 1800s, Dillon said.

The herd has been trimmed periodically through public adoption programs, but has not dropped below 145 animals for at least a decade. The herd dropped to a low of 75 animals after a massive winter die-off in the 1970s, but has at times topped 200 adults, Nickle said.

Monday's BLM study also recommended establishing more watering locations to keep the herd in areas less vulnerable to overgrazing, improving boundary fences to prevent horses from wandering off the range, and closing some recreational roads within the range during foaling season. Bybee said the herd now spends most of its time in the Pryor's upper and lower elevations, avoiding a large swath in between where water is often scarce.

Monday's recommendations will likely be used to develop a draft environmental assessment of the range by this spring. That assessment would lay the groundwork for a possible reduction in the herd, although Bybee said he could not say when that might be implemented.

The range is jointly managed by the BLM, the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service. Seventy percent of it is on BLM land with the remainder controlled by Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, the state National Forest and private landowners.