



NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: David Boyd, BLM Public Affairs Specialist, (970) 876-9008

Two incidents of abandoned horses concern BLM specialists

CRAIG, Colo. – Two recent incidents of domestic horses being abandoned on public lands in Moffat County reflect a continuing problem on public lands in the West.

Since last summer two domestic horses have been found abandoned in the Sand Wash Herd Management Area, a 160,000-acre area north of Maybell, Colo., managed by the Bureau of Land Management specifically for a healthy herd of wild horses.

Domestic horses are typically not adapted to the rugged terrain, or to foraging for food in the harsh high desert conditions of Sand Wash, or to avoiding potential predators. Wild horses will often ostracize and fight off horses not familiar to their band. The chances of a slow and painful death for an abandoned domestic horse are high.

“People may think they are doing their domestic horse a favor by abandoning it near wild horses,” said Kathy McKinstry, a rangeland management specialist with the BLM’s Little Snake Field Office in Craig. “The harsh reality is that most likely their pets will die a cruel and painful death through starvation or dehydration. They could also be killed by dominant band stallions, or attacked and possibly killed by predators such as mountain lions.”

More importantly, McKinstry adds, abandoned domestic horses can introduce disease to a wild horse herd, increasing the risk of a catastrophic die-off of the herd. And dealing with abandoned animals diverts BLM resources away from the wild horses they are tasked with managing.

If BLM discovers an abandoned domestic horse, it will typically attempt to capture the horse as soon as practical and turn it over to the State of Colorado as an estray animal.

Sometimes the domestic horses will readily approach humans and are not difficult to recapture, as was the case in the first instance in Sand Wash. A small sorrel gelding was found during the summer of 2010, very tired and thirsty. It had not found any sources of water and might not have lived for many more days. It was turned over to the State, which was able to find a good home for it.

But other cases can be more difficult. BLM recently discovered a lone, domestic sorrel and white paint mare wandering in the Sand Wash HMA in October. Although the mare was approachable when it was first spotted, it soon began running with a bachelor stallion and is no longer approachable. Often BLM specialists can capture an abandoned domestic horse by baiting it into a temporary corral. In this case, deep snow and its grouping with wild horses make this technique unlikely to be successful.

“If it survives the winter, we’ll have to reassess our options,” McKinstry said.

BLM urges citizens to act responsibly and humanely in caring for their animals. If you are struggling with adequate care of large animals, don’t wait until it’s too late. Place an ad in your local paper to find another owner. If it is an older animal with health issues, have it humanely euthanized. While most rescue organizations in the country are overwhelmed with too many unwanted horses, you can try researching organizations online that are still accepting animals.

“If you find that you can’t take care of your horse or no longer want it, please don’t abandon it on public lands,” McKinstry said. “It’s not just inhumane to abandon any animal on public lands – it’s also illegal.”

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