



SPECIAL RESEARCH GROUP 2006

A contractor for ODFW rounds up wild horses at Sheldon Wildlife Refuge in June.

imaginations. But real, live wild horses roam public plains here in Oregon, their welfare increasingly threatened by a federal administration that sees their hooves and teeth tearing into sensitive habitat — and potential ranching revenue.

The wild horse population has dwindled from about 50,000 in 1971 to some 20,000 today, about 1,000 of them at the Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge on the Oregon-Nevada border. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) wants to whittle Sheldon's mustang population to about 100 well before 2012, said refuge manager Brian Day. "It's just not reasonable to leave the horses to their own devices out there," he said. "The wild horses have to be managed through periodic gathers."

On June 19-20, the USFWS rounded up 335 mustangs at Sheldon by chasing them into holding pens with helicopters. A team of mustang advocates reports that at least four foals died in the process, an adult horse was killed and several mares aborted their fetuses. Day disputes those figures, saying that only two foals died from injuries related to the roundup, three adults died of unrelated injuries and one mare had a stillborn. The USFWS is planning another round-up at Sheldon for late October, or whenever an updated environmental analysis is completed, Day said.

The USFWS gives the captured horses to adoption agents, including Forever Free Mustangs in Oregon, who place them in homes, Day said. But he admitted that some of the horses could end up with owners who sell them to slaughterhouses. "It's always a possibility," he said. "But we have screened our adoption agents, and they're responsible for finding good homes for these horses."

Horse meat fetches up to \$4 per pound in Japan and parts of Europe, and more than 90,000 horses, some of them wild, were killed in three foreign-owned slaughterhouses in Texas and Illinois last year. "Horses that sell at auctions for \$500-\$700, you can be pretty sure they're going to slaughter," said Camilla Mortensen of the Northwest Wild Horse Project.

Mortensen alleges that the USFWS is getting the horses off the refuge in order to sell grazing allotments to ranchers. "It comes down to leasing public land for cattle grazing," she said. "These horses have no protection."

But Day brushes off that claim. "We are sitting on grazing permits, but we have no plans to issue those," he said. Ranchers haven't held grazing permits at Sheldon since 1990, when the USFWS bought the permits back from ranchers with a grant from the

Mellon Foundation, he said.

The dispute between the activists and the feds comes down to perspective. The USFWS views the mustangs as feral domestic livestock, while mustang advocacy groups see them as native wildlife. Wild horses evolved in North America but died out here at the end of the Ice Age; only those that had migrated via land bridge to Europe survived as a species. They were re-introduced to the U.S. with European settlers in the 1500s.

The split perspective leads to schizophrenic laws. Wild horse slaughter was permitted until 1971, when Congress passed an act calling wild horses "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West" and prohibiting their slaughter. In December 2004, Congress repealed that act with a new law allowing the BLM to sell "excess" wild horses at auctions; the new owners may slaughter them for their meat. Horses on USFWS land, such as the Sheldon mustangs, are also unprotected.

Wild horse advocates are now lobbying for The American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act (HR 503), which would prohibit the transporting or sale of wild horses for slaughter. — *Kera Abraham*

On Aug. 26, the Northwest Wild Horse Project will host "Meet a Mustang" from 11 am-3 pm at Avalon Stables, 80143 Hazelton Rd., in Cottage Grove. Locals who have adopted wild horses will demonstrate their gentling in a riding show, and several Sheldon mustangs will be available for adoption. For information, call 556-7162.



COLD WOLF WELCOME

Endangered gray wolves haven't even made a home in Oregon yet, but the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), anticipating their arrival, is preparing to welcome them — with guns.

Buying a home or
refinancing?

Ask your
neighbor.

When it comes to getting help, who better to ask than someone you know? After all, treating Oregonians like neighbors is easier when you live here. And at Oregon Community Credit Union, getting personal service on your mortgage or refinance is just one thing you can expect as a valued member. There are no application fees, pre-approval is free, rates are competitive and we have 50 years of experience. In Oregon. For more information, call us, visit our website or stop by your local branch.



Oregonize® Your Life



Eugene: 541.687.2347
Out of Area: 800.365.1111
www.OregonCommunityCU.org