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Nevada Department of Agriculture

VIRGINIA RANGE ESTRAY HORSE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

HISTORY



In 1971 Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act (WH&B act), which provided federal protection and management for free-roaming horses and burros on public land. The majority of “wild” and free-roaming horses and burros in Nevada fall under the jurisdiction of this federal law and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is charged with managing these wild horse and burro populations.

Since much of the Virginia Range is privately owned, with very little federal land, the BLM determined that there was no basis for the BLM to designate this area as a herd area under the WH&B act and conducted horse capture programs in 1983 and 1984. After these capture programs in Stockton Flat/Horse Springs and Jumbo were completed the Bureau declared these areas as horse free through public decision documents.

Management of the remaining horses in the Virginia Range rests under the jurisdiction of the Nevada Department of Agriculture through the Departments administration of the “*estrays*” livestock provisions of NRS chapter 569 (Attorney General Opinion No. 82-9) and Assembly Bill No. 619 which was enacted during the 1997 State Legislative session.

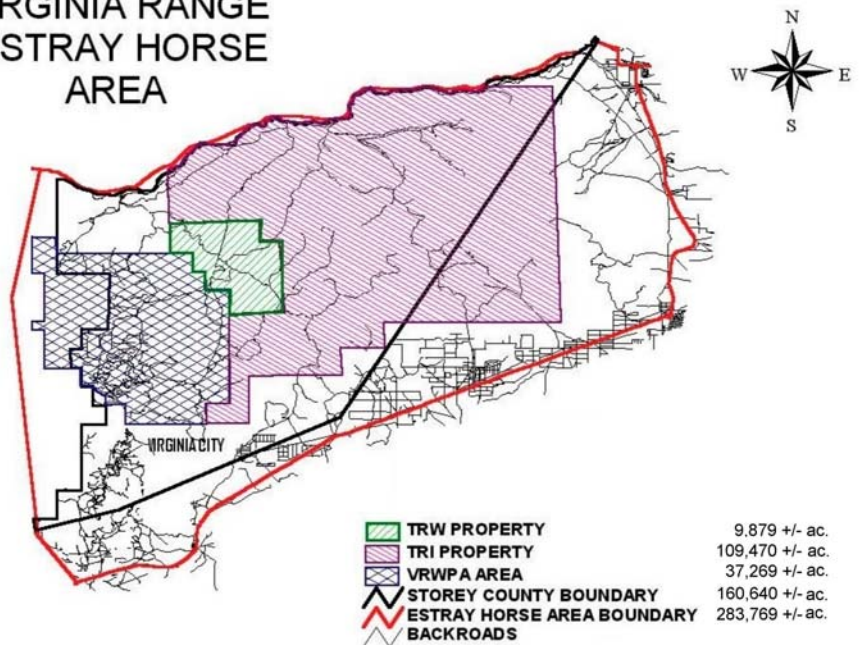
MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

In 1997 the current Virginia Range Estray Horse Management Program was initiated by the Nevada Department of Agriculture. The mission of this program is to develop, maintain and implement a comprehensive Virginia Range estray horse management program. The program focuses on three major areas of concern: (1) public safety and animal welfare; (2) maintenance of a healthy and sustainable estray horse population in the Virginia Range; and, (3) establishment of cooperative agreements with non-profit groups to facilitate the adoption and proper care of the estray horses removed from the Virginia Range.

The Virginia Range herd area consists of an area approximately 283,769± acres bounded on the west by Hwy. 395; on the East by Alternate Highway 95; on the north by the Truckee River and the south by the Carson River. Within this area the majority of land is privately owned (over 160,000± acres). Due to the lack of fences, or poorly maintained fences, the horses in fact utilize a majority of the entire area. The initial aerial census conducted on the Virginia Range in 1997 establishing 413 head of horses on the Range. In June of 2002 an aerial census determined a population of over 1,200 head. The Department has removed over 300 horses since the June 2002 census.

A Range assessment was jointly commissioned between the Virginia Range

VIRGINIA RANGE ESTRAY HORSE AREA



Wildlife Protection Association (VRWPA) and the Department with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to complete a comprehensive habitat capacity analysis. The analysis that was initiated in November 1999, and completed in 2000 represents an estimate of total available forage for horses within the study area of the Virginia Range. Department staff met with the various interest groups to review the NRCS report and discuss the results. It was agreed that the area would support a horse herd of 500 to 600 head under the environmental conditions present at that time. It was also determined that the appropriate horse numbers would be modified over time based upon changing environmental conditions. The actual carrying capacity for horses within the study site will not be known until the target population level is attained and the resulting grazing effects can be monitored over time. Unfortunately the Department has not been able to reach the number agreed upon in 2000 due to numerous reasons. Funding limitations, priority shifts, capture of "at risk" horses and adoption rates have placed the Department in a position such that the number of horses on the range has remained constant with the annual recruitment rate.



The policy of the Department of Agriculture is that stray horses will be removed as soon as practical from congested residential and commercial areas of the range. Horses removed will be relocated or placed in the stray horse adoption program. Furthermore, the Department will remove specified numbers of stray horses from non-congested areas when and where necessary to maintain a healthy and sustainable stray horse population. Decisions for such removals will be based on habitat and resource availability in any given year. All stray horses removed from the Virginia Range will be noticed, processed and held for a maximum of 60 days to allow for proper placement, by non-profit groups, through an approved adoption process. In accordance with existing state statutes, stray horses not placed through the adoption process will be sold at a public sale after the prescribed holding time has expired.

The Department's long term goals are to annually remove 250 to 350 head per year until the agreed upon population level of 550± head is attained and maintain this population level to: a) evaluate the range carrying capacity; b) minimize public safety issues; c) reduce land owner-stray horse conflict; d) increase cooperation and coordination with special interest groups to assure all horses gathered are adopted in a timely manner; and, e) expand collaboration with the Prison Gentling Program.



Since July 2001, many positive developments have taken place with the Virginia Range Estray Horse Program. 2002 saw an increase in gather numbers to 195 horses processed and adopted to safe homes. The Department State Veterinarian, Dr. Thain, has begun a collaborative project with researchers at the Univ. of Pennsylvania and USDA- Wildlife Services. This project is to evaluate several different means of fertility control in mares and stallions. Funding grants are being solicited both from the federal and private sectors. 2003 has been more productive in removing excess horses with the Department's first aerial gather, financed by a USDA grant, allowed capture of more than 170 horses in a 3-day period from the mountains north of Silver Springs. Aerial gathers are by far the most cost effective means of capturing large numbers of horses.

To date of this fact sheet more than 300 horses have been removed in fiscal year 2003, the majority being placed within 30 days of capture. This has had a tremendous impact in reducing the cost per horse. However; with West Nile Virus spreading westward toward Nevada, horses gathered after February 1, 2003 will be vaccinated for this disease which will add a supplementary cost of \$20/head. The Department has increased the number of non-profit groups it works with, which will assist in timely placement of horses after processing. The Department has expanded working agreements with large landowners in the area involved to allow trapping with food and/or water as well as aerial gathers if outside funds can be found.

