

## Thoughts on the wild horse program: Bryan Fuell and Bruce Thompson

By Larry Hyslop



Bruce Thompson (on left) and Bryan Fuell

Bryan Fuell is the BLM's Wells Field Office Manager. Bruce Thompson is the BLM's Elko District Wild Horse Specialist. They have a wealth of knowledge concerning the Wild Horse and Burrow Program since they work with Elko County's wild horse herds on a daily basis.

"I see the program at a turning point right now, with reduced budgets and increased costs within the program," Bruce said. Bryan compared today's program with what he saw when he started working with wild horses. At that time, there was limited long-term holding and all unadoptable horses were left on the range. Only adoptable horses were gathered. The problem was many of the herd populations in Herd Management Areas (HMA) grew faster than could be gathered. Today, many HMAs are closer to their Appropriate Management Level, producing better conditions on the range. But the extra gathers have left far too many horses in long-term holding facilities. Maintaining these captive horses is taking most of the program's budget, compounded by the problem that horses in captivity are living ten years longer than those in the wild.

Concerning the BLM's contraceptive program, Bryan said "PZP has been effective but it is not a silver bullet." This contraceptive keeps mares from foaling for at most two breeding seasons. If the BLM could gather 85-90% of the mares during a gather and repeat this every couple of years, it would be quite effective. The problem is two years with no foals leaves mares in good condition, meaning they usually foal that third year as the PZP wears off.

When asked about the future of the program, Bruce talked about the habitat. He often visits these HMAs and worries about getting into a situation where excess wild horses cannot be gathered. The land could quickly degrade under pressure from too many horses, not being able to provide enough forage and water for the herd. The pressure could impact the habitat and require a long time to recover. Such a situation could impact the land health, wildlife and ranching.

"People, through the voice of Congress, will have to determine the future of the program's budget," Bryan said. The BLM will have to figure out how to maintain the land and gather excess wild horses when most of the budget is tied up in long-term holding costs. He feels litigation and public involvement has always "changed management" for the program but insists the program has adjusted itself to meet the concerns of the public. Bryan is hopeful that they can gather fewer horses off the land and find more adoption homes for those they do need to remove.

Bryan also spoke about Madeline Pickens' Mustang Monument. He feels she does not have a plan that will fix all the budget problems with the program, but feels that having the public view horses on her ranches and allotments may help educate the public about wild horses.

Bruce cited cases when ranchers have gone out of their way to help wild horses. He feels most ranchers like to see horses as part of the Nevada landscape. Problems develop when the BLM doesn't live up to their end of the bargain, by not maintaining the HMAs at their proper populations.

Bryan said "wild horses are valued assets on our public lands and they are not going away, we'll continue to manage them as best we can."

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