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EPISODE NAME: Behind the Scenes of a Wild Horse Gather

Today on across the fence we will get a behind the scenes look at an often controversial subject, a wild horse gather. In doing so we're going to learn about the pilot designated independent observer program initiated by the American horse protection association and some of the key issues associated with the gathering process. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Judy Simpson. Our guest is a frequent contributor to across the fence and in July of 2010 she served as one of those independent observers at the out why he course management area in Nevada. I want to welcome Betsy green from the UVM animal science department and equine specialist with the UVM extension. Great see you again.

Betsy.: Great to be here.

Judy.: That this is a controversial subject. Most people have heard about these gathers but don't really understand the history behind them and what actually happens.

Betsy.: Yes it's highly emotional regardless of which side of the fence you fall on the. I brought some pictures that Cammy Heleski from Michigan State university and I work together on to show what we saw when we were independent observers at this gather in Nevada this past summer. The key thing is we are showing you pictures we took we saw everything that we're not telling you to make a decision or telling you wish decision order showing you what we saw so you can make an educated decision. With some people don't understand is that the bureau of land management or BLM is actually the group that has to manage these courses and the horse management areas the land associated. And they're pulled together or pulled by many different stakeholders so whether it's the hunters that just want to participate in their sport to the extreme that they feel the horses are taking away
from the wildlife and such. You of ranchers that have cattle that are grazing on the open lands. You have taxpayers that are paying for the storage of some of these animals. Many of these animals we will talk about later in long-term holding facilities. Then you have wild horse advocates which go from one extreme to the other from let nature take its corps to let's save all wild horses. It's interesting and very challenging they have a job that I don't think anybody would want.

Judy.: There's so many different issues.

Betsy.: A lot of people don't realize is that they are actually legislated two manage resources in the land associated from 1971 wild horse protection act where wild horses and burros will be allowed to run on public lands and they shall be monitored and overseen. Excess forces are gathered and back originally the legislation says either adopted out or humanely euthanized. Of course there's a public outcry so that humanely euthanized is not happened which led to a long-term holding facilities.

Judy.: Let's face it there's only so many horses that can graze healthfully on so much land.

Betsy.: Absolutely and that brings us to. We missed a slide with the gathering capacity. The horse management areas are actually monitored by range specialists. For water for forage and everything like that to see how many horses they can actually support. That's why they decide when and when together the horses and the gather process is self they actually use unnatural traveling path to the horses. That put together a temporary trap site and then they work to bring those horses in two that trap site. They actually do a by helicopter. This is another hot topic but you can see by the arrows where the helicopter is on the right that Ann of the horses are going down. It was interesting because we had never seen this and this is something where they say helicopters are buzzing the horses and such. They actually used it more like herding like you see a sheepdog and sheep and worked the horses from a distance. I was actually surprised how far off they could be and handle that. When you think about one horse or couple of people on horseback trying to monitor and control a large herd. The helicopter can actually be farther back so that was interesting. Then when they get closer you can see in the picture there's this jute fencing or a burlap fence and the neat part I thought that was this Judas horse. They would bring this horse out to the end of this fencing which was a V shape to funnel and turn the horse loose as the horses were coming in that horse would be trained to run back into the trap site.

Judy.: So the wild horses see this horse standing there and think we'll follow him.
Betsy.: When they turn him loose he runs and they say it O he knows worries going they follow in. I'm not sure what they say about am after they get in there. After they go in you can see an overview of the holding site. There in the initial area larger pens put together sometimes hurts mixed and things like that. This is probably where they're the most agitated but it was surprising how fast they settled down quite a bit as they sat within minutes. After they settled down then they are actually sorted by such groups as full mature stallions juvenile stallions and any injuries or things like that. You can see in this next picture this fowl has an injury but that's something he got out in the wild that obviously an old injury. So the treated those as they sort of them as well. Actually brought a clip of the Judas horse that might Pier from UC Davis Caroline stoke took at the gather she was observing.

Judy.: Let's take a look at that. You can see helicopters in horses being herded. There he is.

Betsy.: The Judas horse.

Judy.: And there he goes I see OK

Betsy.: So he just runs to that trap site.

Judy.: As he's trying to do and the other horses follow him.

Betsy.: Yeah that's just one of those things like I said I'm not quite sure what they say to him after the fact but I thought the Judas horse was an appropriate name. You can see that's the time when the helicopter gets the closest just to make sure their moving in.

Judy.: Yes and they don't seem particularly agitated upset we're running around wildly off.

Betsy.: It was surprising to me I thought they'd be a little bit more frantic but the helicopter was and that loud and in fact we had another set of course is that we had to watch them pick up and they ended up the horses were more afraid of the trailer that was moving back to load them then the helicopter landing behind them and that told me OK that's surprising.
Judy.: You had an interesting turn of events at their site tell me what happened?

Betsy.: We had at our site in particular we didn't know for sure when we were going because we have a situation where there was a drought and I have a couple of slides that show. That's the place where the horses would go to the river to water. You can see the path. There were some fishermen a sporting event or something that was in the area so they wouldn't go to the river but yet because there was a large amount of horses and there was a case where there was overpopulation there was a drought going on. And you could see that this was one of the water holes and if you look and that lower right corner you can see a horse that has died. These courses were extremely dehydrated and on top of that we had animal activists that delayed the gather because they didn't want the horses gathered but the first set that they gathered or so dehydrated when they came in to the holding site they actually drank and tanked up on water. Their body started having issues from colic to swelling to neurological issues and they lost several horses too severe dehydration and water toxicimia. When we actually came they had started this trickle method. It was interesting because it's not a trickle of the water truck dumping water through the first depends. Basically creating money streams. So they're getting that first drink without having such a quantity and that took the edge off and they ended up not having any issues as far as losing any more horses due to the water toxicimia. That was actually a way that they adapted.

Judy.: In other words the horses had they been left and not gathered would probably have died of not having enough water.

Betsy.: Yes because there was severe drought. So that was a huge issue and because there was overpopulation. Because these horse herds are doubling pretty much every four years.

Judy.: That's incredible

Betsy.: So you have a limited amount of land a limited amount of forage and water then you add weather issues to it. Of course we don't have much of a drought around here.

Judy.: No

Betsy.: That all came together in a perfect storm so they have a lot of issues.
Judy.: That obviously complicates things.

Betsy.: Yes and the hard part was when I'm looking at this we're looking at the animal welfare to see if the animals were treated correctly or appropriately and these are wild horses it's not like you can go up and pat them.

Judy.: You can't get too close to them.

Betsy.: No in fact when we were talking about this we actually have a situation where the person we were standing about 20 feet away and suddenly the person that was from the BLM said did you know those horses are going near the water tanks so let's just back off. We backed off another 20 feet and the horses moved into the water tank and we're not doing anything destructive but it was just that much of a difference.

Judy.: Even though there were so thirsty they wouldn't get near the water.

Betsy.: No and they have done other things like but electrolyte tanks with electrolytes trying to help the horses. We didn't see any of the horses train from those tanks they drank from the others. Even on some of the watering holes to try and help with emergency situation that put water tanks in those watering holes and they wouldn't go to the tanks so I started dumping water from the trucks into those holes. It was 1/2 hour drive to the first water hole about a 10 mile walk to the river.

Judy.: We should explain that that they're not watering holes all over the place these horses have to travel.

Betsy.: It was their natural path for a 10 mile walk to water what would we do?

Judy.: We'd be in trouble.

Betsy.: Yeah. It was interesting because the horses are actually in good health as far as body condition. You think about horses and the high desert like this and they were 3-4-5-6 on the scale of 9 for body conditions scores. They're in pretty good health it was just the water emergency that cause them to be dehydrated.
Judy.: As you mentioned this is something that's monitored constantly as far as the number of horses on the land to make sure the horses that are there are healthy.

Betsy.: Yes they do fly overs to two counts and that's where they determine when they need to do the gathers in specific course management areas all over the place. They've also been trying to do different versions of birth control. So there's some PZP where there doing injections where they're trying to decrease the number of fowl so the mare not growing as fast. They also did some sexing as far as having fewer mares out in these areas to try and decrease the growth of the population because these horses are gathered. They go to a long-term holding facility and then they tried to adopt them out. If they can't adopt them out or their returned and then three times they're considered on adoptable there in a holding facility.

Judy.: For how long?

Betsy.: Forever. And that's where the tax payers come in and all of these a good part of the budget its feeding resources in these long-term facilities but the land is not able to support those horses it's kind of a tough situation.

Judy.: It is a tough situation because the other option would be to euthanize them and that's politically not very popular.

Betsy.: That's correct. There's no win in for this situation and people have so many different views on how they should be handled. Some people would prefer to have those horses not be gathered whatsoever and if they lose them then they lose them all but most people don't have that. Most people want to think about the wild horse the beauty and the west but we have encroached upon that with our population.

Judy.: Write so have to figure out a way to keep that herd that's out there healthy because otherwise it would be cruel to let nature take its course in that situation.

Betsy.: We are the ones limiting their space it's awful hard to say by the way you can't go anywhere for water or feed but too bad. When we create these environments we have to manage them.

Judy.: We have about a minute left. Any idea how many horses are in these holding pens long-term.
Betsy.: I think they're saying there's around 30,000 horses in long-term holding pens.

Judy.: As a lot of horses.

Betsy.: It's a lot of horses in their of course fed and cared for as well.

Judy.: Already well if you want more information about this pilot program report by you and your colleagues it can be found where?

Betsy.: It's tiny URL.com/three HZRCUV.

Judy.: Thanks a lot that's a very interesting. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson will see you again next time on across the fence.

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