

Part 2: All the pretty horses - Where do they go?

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(Continued from last week)

However, Eddie Draper, of Bread Springs, N.M., was seemingly confident in plucking horses from the Voluntary Horse Sale in Shiprock, N.M. on Nov. 13.

“[I want the horses] for personal use,” Draper said at the sale. “I’m friends with other ranch owners near Gallup. We hold horse story seminars [every so often].”

Draper said the Gallup horse seminars serve as an avenue for education and recreation, emphasizing the importance of the horse in Navajo culture.

THE PROCESS

The Shiprock Voluntary Horse Sale and Equine Reward Program, and others like them taking place across the reservation, were programs initiated by the Navajo Nation Department of Agriculture in August.

Roxie June, principal planner for the project, said the DOA began meeting on the project in May. After receiving a \$19,000 grant from an unspecified source, the horse buy program was launched. The grant allows the department to give the \$50 reward for each feral horse brought in, once it’s verified that the horse is unbranded.

June said the department partners with Navajo Nation Rangers, the Department of Resource Enforcement, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, District Grazing Committee members and local chapters where the horse buy and sell programs take place.

At the first four events combined, June said nearly 200 feral horses were brought in by residents of the nearby communities where each event is held.

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While the Department of Agriculture deals with the Equine Reward Program, it's not directly involved with the Voluntary Horse Sale, which takes place directly between horse owner and buyer and doesn't involve the tribe.

"[Working directly with the] buyer is a convenience for the Navajo people," June said. "It saves transportation and time."

A DUBIOUS PROCESS?

A source, who works closely with the tribe, and asked to speak under the condition of anonymity, told the *Sun* during a Nov. 28 phone call that anyone can round up unbranded horses and sell them to the Equine Reward Program, so long as they have valid identification.

The source also said the program quickly seeks buyers for unbranded horses prior to each sale.

"They have to rush around and find some buyers," the source said.

But a major cause of concern was the seeming lack of a vetting process for buying unbranded horses, the source said, unlike with the Voluntary Horse Sale, in which the potential buyer must register with the B.I.A.

The source also said, without much trouble, most anyone can buy an unbranded horse(s) during the Equine Reward Program events.

"That's what made me think and say that there's something wrong here," the source said.

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It's a sentiment echoed by Sharron Berry, vice president of Four Corners Pet Alliance, who has advocated for Navajo horses for more than two years. She helped spearhead a horse hydration program during the hot, drought-riddled summer months, in which volunteers hauled water and hay to horses at risk of dehydration and starvation.

Berry posts updates to Facebook groups about her efforts to halt the depletion of the wild horse population. She keeps tabs on auctions and buyers alike.

To that end, Berry said she first got involved with horse rescue through an actual rescue program, which entailed traveling to auction sites and buying horses before they were bought by people or groups who intended to transport the horses across the border to Mexico and sell them for slaughter.

Aside from the tribe's horse buy and sell program, Berry considers the rounding up of wild horses, also interchangeably called feral horses, a cruel method that puts foals and grown horses alike at risk of being trampled to death.

As for 2018, June said without going into details on the tribe's methodology, more than 2,000 feral horses were removed from the reservation by roundup and entrapment between January and July.

It's a practice Berry says her organization wants to stop, calling it "inhumane."

"Most of them don't make it," Berry said during an Oct. 8 phone call with the *Sun*, describing how foals get run down by bigger horses and/or taken from their mothers when they arrive at auctions.

Nearly three years ago, Berry worked with a group of women to raise funds and save upward of 59 foals and mares at one unspecified sale. Once the horses were taken to a safe and secure area, they were treated for any wounds or mistreatment and were eventually taken in by other rescue groups or local people who wanted horses.

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“Most [of the horses] were extremely thin because they sat on the lot too long,” Berry said, describing the malnourished condition she found them in.

Meanwhile, when the horse round ups and buy/sell programs commenced this year, Berry said she contacted numerous tribal officials to confirm whether the events were obeying the law. She asked those officials if the right certificates were in place, what brand inspectors were on hand, and how the health of each horse was verified.

She said there were no straight answers, and many sources were afraid to talk out of fear of losing their job.

And despite reports from multiple sources, the fate of the horses turned into the Equine Reward Program is unknown.

THE KILL BUYERS

The buyers at horse auctions range from individuals wanting a new horse, to rescue groups that raise funds to keep the horses from being bought by other entities known as “kill buyers.”

Berry has been tracking outfits suspected of being kill buyers in New Mexico, but declined to name names at this juncture.

According to The Humane Society of the United States, kill buyers are groups or individuals that buy horses at sales or auctions and then send them to slaughter, often in Mexico. The Humane Society website states that upward of 100,000 horses are funneled over to this slaughter cycle each year.

Berry said what makes these kill buyers dangerous is that some may misrepresent their true

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intentions at the auction or sale. A horse that is bought by someone at an auction saying they have good intentions could be sent off to die in a matter of days.

"I don't think many Navajo people really understand what happens to these people and the horses," Berry said about the tactics of kill buyers.

To date, the names of any buyers have not been released to the public by the Navajo Nation Department of Agriculture.

"... That tribal departments are willing to orchestrate these programs, but then only oversee certain parts of it is a reason for suspicion," Berry said. "The big thing here is, the Navajo Nation is getting the people to do their dirty work."

Part 2 in a 3 part series, continued next week. To read the first installment, visit: www.gallup.com

By Cody Begaye

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