

## **Fact Sheet for Feral Horse Advisory Committee Members**

### **Stakeholder Advisory Committee**

- Committee formed in the fall of 2013
- Includes members with a broad range of positions and interests in the feral horse issue
- Those stakeholders with a legitimate environmental, economic or social interest in the land and associated issues are included in the Committee
- Most Committee members represent organizations with large memberships and/or interest in the issue
- Just as the government is not intending to eliminate the horses, it does not intend to remove any approved uses from the landscape
- Input and advice to the government is by consensus (no formal voting) and all opinions (including dissenting) are recorded and made available to the Minister of ESRD

### **Status of horses**

- Horses are not native wildlife and are not managed under legislation pertaining to wildlife.
- Free-roaming horses come under the Stray Animals Act
- The Province has no plans to change that status, nor does it plan to eliminate them from the landscape
- Shooting, snaring or otherwise mistreating or injuring a horse is illegal under the Criminal Code of Canada or the Animal Protection Act and incidents should be reported immediately to the RCMP

### **Population counts**

- Count process and methodology
  - Counts are done from helicopters using a consistent methodology at roughly the same time each year (after the capture season - usually around the third week in March)
  - Only animals actually seen are counted and thus the annual number represents a minimum population level
  - Areas flown are tracked by GPS and every herd is logged with a GPS waypoint
  - The data is used to determine the level of capture that may be required the following season
  - Overall in the capture area 980 horses were seen in late winter 2013
  - WHOAS members participated in the 2013 count
  - ESRD will be putting more information on 2013 counts with a breakdown for the six equine zones on its website shortly
- Count history
  - Long-term counts have been done in the Sundre/Clearwater Equine Zones since 1982
  - This is a subsection of the designated horse capture area

- Long-term counts in that area show numbers of horses increased from a fairly steady 100-200 during a number of years up to 610 in the late winter of 2013
- Counts over the past number of years have indicated a steady increase in total feral horse populations
- Winter conditions impact
  - Enquiries have been made about the current winter and the impact it may have had on horse numbers (one individual has apparently conducted a count from a fixed wing plane)
  - Success of a count depends on many factors and it is likely there are horses not seen during counts as they are under cover in treed areas
    - For example, during the GPS collar study one band of horses with a collared horse was never found out in the open although the U of A was able to locate them from a signal
  - As noted above, the number of horses counted in the Eastern Slopes has been steadily rising since the early 2000's
  - Long-term population information includes a number of hard/deep snow winters – despite this, the population has shown a significant increase

### **Impact of horses on range health**

- The ecosystem health and protection of the resource from feral horse overgrazing is a key factor in driving the need to manage the populations
- A number of options are being reviewed and a long-term strategy is currently being developed by the Committee
- Given herd population growth the Committee advised the Minister it supported a capture of a specified number of horses for 2014
  - Capture is provided for in legislation and has been an option used by ESRD since 2003
  - Prior to that, unregulated capture took place and generally was adequate to manage the population in the area west of Sundre

### **Capture**

- Process
  - Section 9 of the Stray Animals Act enables the Minister to authorize the capture, confinement, transport and disposition of trespassing livestock, including horses on public land, by license holders
  - The Horse Capture Regulation, established under that Act, specifies a designated area under which capture licenses are issued
  - Purpose of legislation was to ensure humane capture (previously unregulated capture resulted in some inhumane capture practices [snares, etc.])
  - License holders undergo background checks and demonstrate they have the knowledge and experience to handle horses humanely
  - Capture season typically runs from November 1 of each year until March 1 of the next year (can be modified at the Minister's discretion)

- Whether a capture season takes place is dependent on horse population size and distribution, known impact to the resource and public safety concerns (i.e. risk of vehicle collisions)
  - Tampering with capture facilities or interfering in a capture operation are offenses under the Criminal Code of Canada
- 2014 Capture
    - Given the feral horse population size, the Committee advised the Minister a capture season should proceed for 2014
    - WHOAS did not agree with the capture proceeding as WHOAS is of the opinion there is insufficient information relating to the populations and the potential impact of the harsh winter on total numbers
    - Based on past capture practices and population growth numbers, supported by the 2013 count, the Minister approved the capture of up to 200 head this season on January 8
    - Implementation and communication of the Minister's decision to the Committee took place on January 21, 2014
    - Licenses are being issued for up to 25 % of the Sundre and Clearwater Equine Zone populations – a total of 152 horses
      - For this season preference is given to past license holders who have demonstrated exceptional horse handling skills with feral horses
      - To date (Feb. 5) one license has been issued and the Department anticipates issuing two more
    - No licenses are planned to be issued in the Elbow or Ghost River Equine Zones
- Post-capture
    - Use of captured horses depends on the market and on interest and capacity to adopt them
      - Some will end up as rodeo or domestic horses – others will be sent for processing
      - There is a legitimate horse meat industry in Alberta and other Canadian provinces – this will continue whether or not these particular animals are captured or sent for processing
      - It is recognized some find processing to be morally repugnant, just as, for example, others regard the legitimate activities of sport hunting or the killing and eating of beef cattle to be unacceptable
      - The Alberta government is not planning to shut down these industries
    - ESRD will encourage license holders to work with agencies that wish to place horses for adoption
      - License holders are being given the contact information for individuals or groups interested in acquiring captured horses
      - License holders have the option of requesting ESRD offer their contact phone numbers to those individuals interested in adopting or purchasing a feral horse

**Other control options (contraception etc.)**

- Committee has discussed a number of options for management of horse populations at its meetings
- In the short term, the Committee recommended a capture season (see Capture discussion above)
- Committee will consider other control options in the longer term and will be asked to consider presentations from experts on, for example, contraception

## **EIA**

- Some Committee members raised Equine Infections Anemia as a potential concern in the free-roaming horse populations in the foothills and recommended ESRD address it
- ESRD does not have internal expertise on horse disease issues
- ESRD has consulted provincial authorities and will be consulting additional experts in Alberta Agriculture and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency regarding testing/exploring the issue further to determine if EIA is prevalent.
- ESRD plans to offer testing for EIA for horses that are being adopted or sold, particularly colts and yearlings.

## **Access to the Forest Reserve:**

- The grazing tenure in the Forest Reserve does not prevent public access. Many roads in the Forest Reserve are developed by industrial/commercial users for access to their operations. These roads are usually authorized under a License of Occupation (LOC) under the Public Lands Act and the holders are accountable for its condition.
- An LOC may not be used for any commercial use without authorization of the holder. Holders of LOCs for resource use frequently authorize other commercial users as both a cost sharing move and for reduction of footprint (which ESRD supports.)
- In many areas of the province LOCs are available for public vehicular access. In other situations they are closed to the public year round or seasonally because of wildlife management, safety or soil conservation concerns. This closure is provided for, and must be authorized by ESRD, under the Public Land Administration Regulation. This is the authority that allows a gate to be locked.
- The Forest Reserve may be accessed by snowmobile (although not on closed roads), on foot, skis, etc.

## **Links:**

ESRD Website: <http://esrd.alberta.ca/lands-forests/land-management/feral-horses/default.aspx>

ESRD blog: <http://aesrd.wordpress.com/2014/01/22/managing-albertas-feral-horse-population-the-rules-and-regulations-of-a-capture-season/>

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