

US Fish and Wildlife Service Appears Poised to Ship Sheldon Range Wild Horses to Slaughter at Taxpayer Expense!

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By: Susan Pohlman, Valerie James-Patton and John Holland

While many Americans have watched in anguish as the BLM has systematically reduced herd after herd of Spanish Mustangs to genetically dangerous numbers, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&W) has been quietly engineering a plan to eradicate their (actually *the American public's*) Sheldon range wild horses in Nevada. It is a plan so arbitrary, deceptive, and arguably illegal that it makes the BLM actions look like positively responsible husbandry!

The newly announced plan starts by making it impossible for rescues and individuals to directly adopt small numbers of the Sheldon horses as has been done in the past. In what amounts to having agents launder horses to certain slaughter, the “more efficient” new plan allows for only “mass adoptions” of the horses, and lists three “carefully screened” agents. More astoundingly, the plan pays the agents \$300 per horse to take them by the truck load. While the agreements to pay these “adoption agents” clearly constitute federal contracts for services aggregating in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, the agent selection process appears to have involved no public bidding or disclosure and may well violate Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR).

Claiming that the horses are non-indigenous and feral, and thus not protected (as are the Spanish mustangs on BLM land), the USF&W has published its intention to completely remove them from the Sheldon range where they have lived since long before there was a USF&W. Unlike the Spanish mustangs, the Sheldon horses are largely descended from US Cavalry mounts. The stated reason for their removal is to protect the water resources and to enhance the populations of Pronghorn Antelope and Sage Grouse, two species that bring in revenue from special hunting permits.

But the removal itself may not be legal because the herds intermingle with protected mustang herds from adjoining BLM lands, and because the USF&W has not performed an Environmental Evaluation study. By ignoring NEPA (the National Environmental Policy Act) and failing to conduct the required study, the USF&W officials have not even established that the horses have an adverse affect on the grouse and antelope. Astoundingly, a published USF&W paper available on line concludes that, in reasonable numbers, wild horses have *no demonstrable adverse affect* on these species.

The mass adoption program appears to have had its test flight with a mom and pop “mustang rescue” run by Flora and Francis Steffan, and ironically named Forever Free Mustangs, (FFM). In conversations with potential adopters, Flora stated that FFM had placed 680 Sheldon horses last year, but when asked by Mr. Holland to confirm the number of horses and the timing, she became vague. When asked if FFM received \$300 per horse, she responded “not for all of them”. When asked for specifics, she became increasingly defensive. She stated that they had been careful to get them good homes and

to make sure they did not go to slaughter. In conversations with others, Flora indicated they placed yet another “load” in January of this year and expected the next load in June. The timing of the gathers would indicate that FFM was able to place large numbers of horses within months or even weeks of their arrival.

Several other mustang rescues that received Sheldon horses were contacted for a comparison. Strawberry Mountain Mustangs, that took 27 Sheldon horses during 2004 and 2005, offered to provide complete documentation on their placement, as did Emerald Valley Equine. Sandy Huey of Emerald Valley, who received 12 horses, responded that “Mustangs are very difficult to place”. Despite advertising in the very area where FFM was having such success, neither organization has yet placed all of the horses they received last year.

In further comparison, Habitat for Horses (HfH) is the largest rescue in Texas with 2200 members and 160 active foster homes. Their combined operations placed about *150 horses* in the past *15 months*, a rate that pales to insignificance in comparison to the amazing performance of the Steffans. The comparison becomes starker yet when one considers that HfH was placing almost exclusively domestic horses while FFM was offering horses that had never been handled and required special knowledge, fencing and facilities.

More tellingly, Forever Free Mustangs has admitted that approximately 40 of the horses they originally adopted were found in a slaughter pen and had to be “bought back”, telling one caller that it had cost FFM \$24,000. And these were not the only horses from FFM to find their way to slaughter. One donor claims that a young horse donated to FFM with the understanding that it would be “fixed up” for adoption, was found to have been run through an auction just days later where it had been sold to a killer buyer.

The only horses remaining on the FFM property at the time of this writing were a few dozen horses reportedly involved in an experimental USF&W fertility study involving the placement of glass marbles in the uterus of mares to prevent conception. But on the FFM website (the logo for which was copied without permission from an established mustang rescue), Flora and Francis Steffan discuss their grand plans to expand to an 800 acre parcel this year.

In the minutes of a “kick off” meeting with FFM (3/7/06), David Johnson, Deputy Project Leader at Sheldon-Hart Mountain Wildlife Refuge Complex, speaks of eliminating the wild horses completely from the sanctuary and of establishing a “Hollywood herd” on the FFM property. The herd would consist of only the best horses gathered from the remaining population. Their plan for this herd is apparently to use them as a show piece and as the justification for FFM continuing to solicit donations after all the wild horses have been removed from the Sheldon range. But the 800 acre dream refuge, like so many things about FFM, is shrouded in contradictions.

In March the Steffans applied for a building permit on an 800 acre parcel owned by Stephen F. Roth, but the application states that the use of the land will remain as a cattle

operation that will have historically established revenues of about \$360,000 per year. Cattle style fencing is dangerous and ineffective for holding wild horses. The minutes of the FFM kick off meeting state that fencing of the property (for wild horses) had already begun but in the Farm Plan of the application it states that there would be no new fences. A separate permit was filed by the Steffans for the construction of a barn and arena.

Despite written assurances from the Steffans to potential donors that they are indeed a registered 501C3 non-profit, a check of FFM's non-profit status located only an Oregon state registration. Mr. Holland asked Flora Steffan about this and was referred to FFM's accounting firm for confirmation of the 501C3 status. Joanne Shackelford CPA replied that FFM was still in the process of solidifying their board of directors and will soon apply for 501C3 status. She pointed out that "The IRS allows up to 27 months from formation to submit this non-profit application. Until that time, the non-profit status is considered to be pending."

Apparently encouraged by the incredible efficiency of the Forever Free Mustangs adoption process, Brian Day, Sheldon Fish and Wild Life Service Refuge Manager, sent a letter to potential adopters in May announcing the new policy of funneling all horses through agents. The letter states "*I have made it abundantly clear to all of them that the worst thing that could happen to this program is to have horses end up in a slaughter facility.*" In the letter he announced that they had found a third agent and that a thorough screening had shown this man to be of the highest integrity. The new agent's name was Gary Graham and his address was later given as 440 W. Highway 6, Los Lunas, New Mexico. A background check on Graham returned only the address and telephone number given by USF&W, but the address was a different matter.

The Graham address is virtually a Grand Central Station of horse slaughter. It is well known to the purchasing agents of the BelTex slaughter house in Texas. A summary check of their records showed that one Bill Owen used the same address when he delivered dozens of loads of horses to slaughter even as the Steffans were having such remarkable success finding "local adopters".

But the slaughter connection to Gary Graham's address does not end there. A physical check of the location revealed that it is the home of the Southwest Stock Yard run by one Dennis Chavez. Dennis Chavez was also busy delivering horses to BelTex during the period of FFM's adoption success, but using the address 24 Dallies Road, an address that is virtually the same property as that of Gary Graham and Bill Owen! And as if this were not enough, it is the address used by one Leon Spain when he delivered slaughter horses to the Dallas Crown slaughter plant in Kaufman, Texas.

In explaining the concept of paying agents to "adopt" the horses in bulk, Johnson sites the BLM's cost for every horse they place as being nearly \$1,000. By this reasoning, the USF&W paying only \$300 is a bargain, never mind that BLM is actually trying to find real homes for their horses and keeping them in holding facilities until they can be adopted. Considering that the USF&W is providing \$300 per horse, and that the large

Sheldon horses may bring \$400 to \$500 or more at the slaughter house, the money involved could run easily into six or even seven figures.

Now, in the middle of foaling season, USF&W has announced that another gather is imminent and that horses will be available as soon as mid-June. A gather at this time represents a cruel assault on pregnant mares and new-born foals. No explanation was given for the unusual timing.

The Sheldon plan is darkly troubling at every level. It is a plan to eradicate an icon of the west for no scientifically established reason. It would reward with brutal betrayal the descendants of the very horses that made it possible for the United States government to conquer the West. It would enrich those who will almost certainly send these beautiful creatures to a frightening and brutal end. And it is a plan to cover this all up with the kind of false assurances and nebulous front organizations that make a mockery of public stewardship. And finally, it is a plan that ignores decades of legislative environmental safeguards and substitutes sweet-heart deals made in private for openness and accountability.

Please contact the US Fish and Wildlife Service and your congresspersons and senators and ask them to put a halt to the program until the safety of these horses can be assured. You will find the contact information for your representative and senators at:

<http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/>

The US Fish and Wildlife Service can be contacted at:

<http://www.fws.gov/dupspit/contactus.htm>

[This alert is based on data gathered by the Special Research Group, an entirely independent volunteer organization. Supporting documents are available upon request. Contact John Holland at hollandtech@earthlink.net]