

Federal agency spurs people to adopt wild horses

April 24 2009, By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN , Associated Press
Writer

(AP) -- A federal agency is hoping older wild mustangs rounded up from the range will find new homes with a program that will offer stipends to owners who adopt them.

Wild horse populations have boomed across the West, putting pressure on the range. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management rounds up thousands of the animals each year, but it's had a hard time finding buyers in recent years.

With the new program, anyone who adopts a wild horse 4 years or older will be eligible for a \$500 stipend at the end of their first year with the animal. The stipend is designed to help with the adopter's cost of keeping a horse, BLM spokesman Paul McGuire said Thursday.

The program is being launched in the BLM region that includes New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, which McGuire described as a "robust market" for wild horse adoptions.

"If it works here, we can assume it would be equally effective elsewhere around the country," he said. "That would eventually be the goal to expand the program nationally if it proves to be effective in terms of increasing adoptions of these targeted horses."

The stipend will be offered starting next month with an adoption at the Creek County Fairgrounds in Kellyville, Okla.

The BLM has placed more than 235,000 wild horses in approved homes over the past 36 years. But drought, skyrocketing fuel prices and economic uncertainty have made things difficult for the program in recent years.

The agency, which is out of room at its long-term holding facilities, has been trying to come up with ways to manage wild horses without euthanizing any of the animals or selling them for slaughter. Still, expenses continue to rise.

Last year, it cost the agency more than \$28 million to hold 33,000 horses and burros. Unchecked, federal officials have said that could reach \$77 million by 2012.

A horse in long-term holding costs the agency about \$500 to feed and care for annually and that can reach up to \$12,500 over the lifetime of the horse.

McGuire estimates there are about 5,000 horses in the adoption pipeline that would meet the criteria for the incentive program. The \$500 stipend would not apply to younger horses, burros or those animals that have been trained.

The Texas-based Mustang Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit organization that partners with the BLM to boost adoptions, offers similar incentives in many of its programs.

"We've found that it really works if you offer them just a little bit to help pay for some feed costs and medical expenses and things like that," said Kali Sublett, an event coordinator with the foundation. "We know and the BLM knows that it's hard right now for everyone so any little bit that they can do can help."

McGuire said the BLM is excited about the incentive program and officials are hopeful the agency will reach its goal this year of adopting 3,295 mustangs. So far, 1,471 have been adopted, and the agency is just now entering its busiest period.

On the Net:

BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program:

<http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/wild-horse-and-burro.html>

Mustang Heritage Foundation:

<http://www.mustangheritagefoundation.org/>

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Citation: Federal agency spurs people to adopt wild horses (2009, April 24) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-04-federal-agency-spurs-people-wild.html>

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