

WHOAS meets with government officials to review Horse Capture Regulations

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A monumental meeting was held in in the Red Deer Provincial Building on June 9th between representatives of Lands and Forest Division, Livestock Inspection Services, Fish and Wildlife Division and the Wild Horses of Alberta Society. The parties met together for a round table discussion regarding the problems surrounding the wild free-roaming horses of Alberta. (otherwise referred to as feral by the government). The meeting was held to discuss input provided by WHOAS (and other stakeholder groups) as requested by the government back in January. The meeting was called to address the concerns regarding these animals for the benefit of all concerned. Some of the issues addressed include the following;

1. Horse Capture Permits Review.

It was suggested that WHOAS review the permit process and submit its recommendations for improvement. WHOAS maintained that their parties position has never been against capture, so long as it is necessary for population control or if the horses are posing a threat to motorists by lingering about in high traffic areas. The actual number of animals a permit holder can take will be reviewed. Changing the ratio is important along with the sex of the horse being an issue. WHOAS suggested a ban on roping as it is both inhumane and dangerous for both the wranglers mount and the horse being roped. Any capture should be done by the use of pens only, as it is the most humane method of any type of capture.

2. Horses to have own legislation to include being defined as Wild, Free Roaming, rather than Feral.

As has been done in the USA for over fifty years, WHOAS suggested that these horses have their own legislation. Public Lands and Forest Division pointed out that it is a lot more difficult to introduce new legislation than it is to amend existing legislation. They feel that amending the current legislation would achieve a similar result. Any changes to the current legislation would be put before the legislative counsel to draft the wording.

3. Adoption rather than slaughter.

Problems regarding this idea is that if the permit holders could only sell the horses for adoption not for slaughter then the less desirable animals would be left behind to become breeding stock, and only the good ones taken out. WHOAS suggests that some people would adopt older or less fit animals just to for the sake of being put out to pasture rather than to death. Furthermore, that creating good riding animals should not be a motivating factor, as it is often not feasible to begin with, regardless of the age of these particular horses. This issue is indecisive at this point and a matter which will be addressed down the road.

4. Province wide capture regulations, not just for a designated area.

Rather than just for specific areas, a permit/control system should be implemented for all of Alberta.

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5. *Allegations of grazing allotments for cattle cleaned up by Horses prior to cattle arriving and damage to sapling trees planted by logging companies.*

It was suggested that further study be done which would include documentation and photographing of area in question and that if some horses are responsible, then these concerns would be addressed accordingly. At present there are no allowances in carrying capacity calculations for horse use, therefore, it was suggested that we work toward addressing this issue.

6. *Horses considered invasive species by some.*

Not everyone is in favour of these horses. However, it has never been the governments position that they be eradicated from their natural environment and this is evident by the horse capture regulations themselves. Other governments have culled off wild free roaming horses entirely, whereas the Alberta Government has never taken such a hard line stance.

7. *Legality of Horse Hunting on Public Lands to be reviewed.*

There have been several random cases of horse shootings in the past. However, the number of reported incidents are declining. In order to assure that horse shootings are eliminated, we have suggested that hunting of horses on public land be made illegal. Government has agreed that current legislation will be reviewed and changes will be proposed to make hunting of horses on public land illegal.

8. *Ear Tag system for captured animals.*

This system could be used as further proof of a legitimate capture, however, it is not believed to be an effective deterrent to poachers. The tag system may be effective when and if all livestock are required to be tagged. Current legislation is believed to be forthcoming which will require the identification of all domestic livestock including horses with the CCIA method of identification.

9. *Surveying of numbers*

The government does an aerial head count the same time of year after the capture season . What they see does not accurately reflect what there is. Some horses are well hidden in the trees during the count. However consistency in the method, location and timing of the counts provides credibility to the population trends. The counts west of Sundre, is pretty accurate, being 150 to 200 head. They claim that the numbers fluctuate slightly but overall stay relatively the same. Horses have been managed through the permit system but never with a specific number as a guiding factor. Minimum population levels are maintained. More scientific count is needed, as well as studying the population dynamics, however there is no money for this from the government. Fish and Wildlife would like to see an increase in funds for recording numbers of horses, a coordination of counts and ways to increase efficiencies.

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10. *Enforcement, Penalties and Prosecution*

The problem, thus far, is not that the legislation has no teeth, but that it is hard to catch poachers red handed and the lack of proof that the horse in question is indeed from crown land. Along with this problem is when information is leaked too soon, when they, the Fish and Wild Life Officers, are investigating specific individuals, or a crime scene is trampled on by non investigative personnel and whereby evidence is ruined. WHOAS agreed that this may be an issue and will work more closely with the responsible agency in this matter.

11. *WHOAS to liase with Govt regarding illegal horse activities*

The two groups have resolved to work together. A contact person with the department of Lands and Forests Division was appointed for wild horse abuse.

12. *Reward Fund and Scientific study of Horses*

It was recommended that WHOAS develop a reward fund for reports of crimes against these horses, and that they have a scientific study done on these animals to further their cause.

13. *Government links to WHOAS Website*

Land and Forests Division staff have offered to develop information on their website regarding these horses and will be providing this link to WHOAS. Information will likely include frequently asked questions as well as statistics on annual counts and numbers of horses removed by permit.

14) *Terminology used for the horses on crown land.*

Although the government and WHOAS may differ in the definition/label to be given these horses and whether or not specific legislation be granted to them, we do however, mutually agree, that improvements to the current system need to be made and now is in the works.