

Montana is home to a new wild horse facility

By Larry Hyslop



Captive wild horses adapting to their new surroundings on the Spanish Q Ranch, photo by Karen Rice

The BLM's Wild Horse and Burro Program is always looking for more sites to hold 47,000 excess, captive wild horses. The search is expanding and a Montana ranch has become the first long term holding (LTH) facility in the Western US. The existing LTH facilities are all in the mid-west.

The Spanish Q Ranch outside of Ennis, Montana, has a contract to care for captive horses, being paid \$1.36/head/day. Horses are already arriving from short-term holding facilities such as at Fallon. Six truck loads have arrived so far, containing about 350 horses. Short-term holding facilities cost about \$5.50/head/day so the BLM is happy to place them on the Spanish Q Ranch land, officially called the Ennis Long-Term Holding Pasture.

In the past, this ranch raised as much as 2,000 cattle on about 15,000 private acres but will now hold up to 800 geldings. To simplify things, LTH facilities contain either geldings or mares. The arriving horses are being held in a feedlot situation for two months to allow them to adjust to each other and to the setting, as the ranch converts their long-term pasture fences to 48" high, a stipulation of the BLM contract. Most of the horses have spent at least one year in short-term holding facilities so they are used to fences and feeding.

Carolyn Chad is acting deputy division chief for the BLM's National Wild Horse and Burro Program. She described how the BLM arrived at the carrying capacity of 800 horses. It was not a conversion where so many cattle equals so many horses. The BLM arrived at the number based on a very conservative estimate of holding capacity. The BLM wants the horses held in something close to a natural setting, where rocky ground will mean no hooves will need trimming and no routine vaccinations will be given.

The horses will need to be fed supplemental feed for four months each year. The BLM will monitor horse condition and vegetation usage to make sure the ranch property remains in good condition. If so, the number of horses could be increased to over 1,000. It is thought the condition of the ranch's riparian areas may even improve, based on horses using stream banks less than cattle. The ranch is large enough that horses can be moved among several large pastures, resting large areas over two years and reducing competition between horses and elk that also use the ranch.

The BLM has been working on this project since 2009 and completed an environmental assessment, but some neighbors are appealing the BLM decision. They feel the ranch's fencing will not be able to contain the geldings and the ranch cannot sustain that many horses. The appeal has not yet been ruled

on by the Interior Board of Land Appeals. It is possible the horses might need to be moved back to either short-term or other long-term holding facilities.

Wildlife advocates are unhappy about the extra 2" in fence height. They worry wildlife could become caught as they jump the fences, but the BLM says if this happens, the fences can be modified in the future.

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