2015 Big Summit Wild Horse Territory Census

December 2015

The 2015 census took place June 25-27, in some of the more threatening heat in the history of the organized count. Approximately 90 volunteers were spread well beyond the Territory boundaries, from Sheep Corral on the 2630 to Allen Creek, with additional camps placed at the 2630-250, and north of the 22 Road to cover the Lunch/Cup Springs area. Despite the heat, there were no reported injuries or illnesses among the volunteers or their horses.

The trend observed in the last several years, where most of the horses have congregated in the Cram/Howard area during early summer, continued through 2015. A slight deviation was that in 2015, the horses primarily used the area west of the Big Summit Prairie fence initially, then moved to the timbered slope south of the 210 Road.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to validate numbers of horses sighted during the census, as nearly 90% of the horses have conspired to disappear into a "Where's Waldo" scenario between trees and shadows with just enough movement to make counting impossible. Even when the last photo documentation was received (December), and when that was compared to notes taken by the same ride unit, there is still hard evidence missing. However, we have enough trust in our seasoned volunteers to take their numbers at face value, at least as an estimate. The question still unresolved is whether or not the numbers counted included known bands and individuals. Even so, this year's total is consistent with steady, predictable growth compared to 2014. If anything, 2014 may have been under-counted.

Once again, most units found few to no horses. Units reporting are as follows:

Sheep Corral - 0. A nearby camp reported to our volunteers that they had seen a large bachelor band moving from that area toward Round Mtn., supposedly containing a uniquely colored stud. If that was the colt known as "Razzle", his band was seen at Cram Creek as well. However, in late summer, a large bachelor band had taken up residence in the 2630-350 area, although there were no particularly distinguishing individuals in that band.

Base Camp - 3. 2 studs, 1 mare. The heart of this group is still a horse named "Dale", the surviving member of the 2011 shootings in that area.

Allen Creek Horse Camp - 1. Indications of a few others, but not seen.

22 North - 4. Bays, 1 colt.

Whitney Spring/Coyle Creek - 1. Bay stud.

Howard Creek - 5. 9 horses were seen, but 4 were also sighted by the Davis Spring group.

Davis Spring - 4. Gelato, and the hump-backed mare +2

Cram Creek - 134. The only significant uncertainty with this number is whether it includes the Novio/Paint Mare/Bay South Steens Mare band. The possibility of those horses not being counted is

probably outweighed by double-counting of some of the 134.

Total - 152

This year, there were no known incidents of the sudden, inexplicable deaths we observed around census time in the Cram Creek area.

One colt, 1-2 days old, was abandoned along the 4210 Road in late May, and was retrieved by Connie Baker and Dewey Hamilton with permission from the Forest Service. He was taken directly to Prineville Veterinary Clinic and after 4 days of treatment was sent home with Connie. After about 3 months he was adopted to a couple living in Junction City where he continues to thrive.

In late September, we were able to locate the injured filly named Faith, in the 2630-350 area. It was determined that she would not make it through winter without intervention. The Forest Service granted permission to the Central Oregon Wild Horse Coalition to capture, evaluate, and provide treatment for Faith. With the help of Dr. Rhet Schultz and the Forest Service, we were able to tranquilize the filly and proceed with the best possible course of action for her. Further evaluation revealed that in addition to the hind leg fractures and infection, she had a serious fracture in a front leg, and her other two legs were already showing signs of compensatory stress. The decision was made to euthanize her.

It is our recommendation for 2016 that all volunteers come prepared with empty video cards in cameras, so that they can provide that card to the Forest Service promptly at the end of the census, or immediately download it to a flash drive. When camera memories already hold private, unrelated photos, it entails significant effort to separate census photos and reload them to a separate drive. This delay in documentation cannot continue if this census is to be considered a valuable tool in the managment of the Big Summit Herd.

With this single recommendation, our volunteers continue to be committed and responsible, and their outstanding safety record over the course of these years of participation is worthy of some sort of meaningful recognition from the Forest Service.

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