Removal of Unbranded/Unauthorized Cattle
Gila Wilderness, Gila National Forest

There are approximately 200-250 cattle in the Gila Wilderness, Gila National Forest. These cattle have existed as wild entities for decades and their destructive habits are a threat to water sources, habitat for T&E species, the natural quality of the wilderness characteristics, and the ecosystems within the forests.

The cattle problem began when a permittee went through bankruptcy and left the country in the 1970s. The successor permittee took possession of the abandoned cattle but was unable to gather or manage a large portion of the animals he had purchased.

Due to generations in the wild and the nature of these cattle, prior removal attempts (of which there have been several) have been insufficient. The behavior of these unauthorized and unbranded cattle make removal dangerous. They pose a significant threat to the people doing the gathering, and to the animals and resources used in their removal.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Are the cattle in the Gila Wilderness trespass cattle?** There are no active allotments in the Gila Wilderness on the Wilderness Ranger District where these cattle are located. Any cattle, sheep, goat, hog, or equine not defined as a wild free-roaming horse or burro by 36 CFR §222.20(b)(13), which is not authorized by permit (or Bill for Collection) to be upon the land on which the livestock is located, and which is not related to use authorized by a grazing permit (livestock owned by other than a national forest grazing permit holder are defined as unauthorized livestock. The cattle in the wilderness fit this definition.

- **What authority does the Forest Service have to remove cattle from the Gila Wilderness?** 36 CFR 222 (federal regulations) and Forest Service Handbook 2200 provides administrative and management authority for grazing activities on USDA Forest Service administered lands. As the delegated land manager, the Gila NF has the responsibility for caring for the resource. The Gila NF will publicly post impoundment notices in courthouses and the US Post Office to give prior notification of the actions. In addition, the FS will be sending copies of the impoundment notice to permittees with adjoining allotments.

- **What authority does the forest have to dispatch the cattle?** The forest will not be dispatching the cattle. This mission of the USDA APHIS Wildlife Service is committed to resolving wildlife conflicts. NM Livestock Board acknowledges that the delegated authority for the cattle is within the purview of the USDA Forest Service, specifically the Gila National Forest.

- **Has the presence of the cattle been verified?** The Gila NF surveyed the area in July 2020 and has seen cattle in approximately four miles of the Gila River above the confluence with Sapillo Creek.
The Gila NF has also received multiple anecdotal sightings from employees, outfitters, and other members of the public around Miller Springs Cabin, Granny Mountain/Granny Bench, Turkey Creek and on the Gila River.

**Things to Know**

- USDA APHIS conducted a reconnaissance mission in mid-June 2021 to verify numbers, topography, and brands/ear tags. At the time of the reconnaissance there was the Johnson Fire (~88,800 acres) which was hampering the ability to see most of the animals. In addition, due to exceptional drought conditions, animals were scattered seeking water sources.
- The Gila NF has contracted with APHIS Wildlife Services for the humane and lethal removal of the unbranded/unauthorized cattle.
- USDA APHIS is recommending that the cattle removal be done in a phased approach for maximum efficiency.
- The target date for this removal process is late April-May 2022. Removal operations may be continued in 2023.
- The Gila NF will implement a temporary area closure for public safety as appropriate.
- Prior to lethal removal, the Gila NF will notify all interested parties who wish to participate in an informal gather of the livestock to participate in a removal.
- The Gila NF will continue to explore a variety of options for removal of the cattle.