

History of park horses is debated

BY BLAKE NICHOLSON THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MEDORA — The grace and beauty of the wild horses roaming in Theodore Roosevelt National Park are not in dispute, but there is disagreement about where they came from, and how to manage them.

A roundup, called off earlier this month after a helicopter crash that injured two people, was to cull 75 of the park's herd of about 125 horses for auction to bring the herd down to 50, a size park officials consider more manageable.

“This is a demonstration herd,” said park wildlife biologist Mike Oehler. “We have a population objective of between 50 and 90 animals.”

Karen Sussman, president of the Lantry, S.D.-based International Society for the Protection of Mustangs and Burros, said reducing the park's wild horse population to 50 would be a mistake because it might increase inbreeding and lead to genetic flaws that would hurt the horses' survival chance. It also would make the herd more vulnerable to blizzards or other bad weather, she said.

“Fifty is not a sustainable number,” Sussman said. It is “absolutely a death spell to horses over a long period of time.”

Oehler believes 50 animals is a viable population for the park. Maintaining a larger herd would require more management, including more roundups and culling, which can be stressful on the horses, he said.

“We don't like to run them in every year,” he said. “The more the better' is the philosophy of some people, but they don't realize the problems involved.”

The National Park Service, unlike the Bureau of Land Management, does not maintain a large number of wild horses. The BLM has about 31,000 wild horses and burros in 10 Western states that are protected by federal law. The National Park Service has fewer than 700 wild horses, in five national parks.

Minnesota horse breeders Nola and Dave Robson and Bob and Deb Fjetland are among those who believe the horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park are

descendants of horses owned by the Plains Indians. They call the breed Nokota, and are dedicated to its preservation.

“That’s pretty important to us, their lineage,” said Nola Robson, who was among the breeders who came to Theodore Roosevelt National Park last week for the wild horse roundup that was called off.

Park Superintendent Valerie Naylor said it is impossible to prove or disprove the Nokota theory, since samples of horse genetics from the pre-settler days do not exist.

“These are feral horses. They’re not truly wild,” she said. “They’re descendants of domestic stock that has gone wild.”

It is possible some of the horses are descended from the time of the Plains Indians, but “there’s no way to prove that genetically,” Naylor said.

The park horses come from ranch stock that was running loose in the North Dakota Badlands when the park was fenced in the 1950s, she said. They were kept in the park so the public could see free-roaming horses — “what things were like in Roosevelt’s time” — she said.

Deb Fjetland said Nokota horse breeders are dedicated to preserving the wild horses.

“The whole history that goes back to Theodore Roosevelt, the continuation of that history, we’ve got the bug to continue it,” she said.