Plans for wild horse herd at Theodore Roosevelt National Park range from no change to no horses

The National Park Service is reexamining its management of more than 180 horses for the first time since it adopted an environmental assessment in 1978. Options range from maintaining the current program to allowing the herd to "live out their lives in the park."

By Patrick Springer

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The fate of the wild horse herd at Theodore Roosevelt National Park is at stake as a new management plan could remove the herd entirely or leave it unchanged under a range of options under consideration.

The National Park Service is reexamining its management of more than 180 horses for the first time since it adopted an environmental assessment in 1978 that recommended reducing the herd to 35 to 60 head by removing 30 to 40 horses at the time.

No horses will be removed from the park until the management plan has been adopted.

“We’re going to hold on anything until we get through our management plan,” said Maureen McGee-Ballinger, deputy superintendent. “So, currently we don’t have any plans for spring,” when horse roundups usually occur.

Besides removing horses, the park service uses a contraceptive drug to control the herd’s population. Colorado State University was conducting research on the drug, administered by shooting mares with a dart, but is no longer involved in the program, she said.

Comments on the use of contraceptives to control the horse population can be made in response to the management options, McGee-Ballinger said.

No horse roundups were conducted in 2020 because of the pandemic.

Public comments are being solicited until April 15 on six possible livestock management plans proposed by park officials.

After comments are received, the park service will work on drafting the management plan, a process likely to take about a year, McGee-Ballinger said.
feral horses in the badlands during the open range era when Theodore Roosevelt ranched near Medora.

The horses roam the south unit of the park, where Medora is the gateway, while nine head of cattle graze in the north unit, south of Watford City. Bison, elk, pronghorns and other native species are found in both park units.

Draft preliminary alternatives under consideration and subject to public comment will be discussed during a virtual meeting on Wednesday, March 30:

- **No action**: Stewardship of the horse and livestock herds would continue under current management plans with an objective of having 35 to 60 horses and up to 12 longhorn steers. This would require “ongoing capture, handling and sale of excess horses, along with contraception of some segment of the horse herd.”

- **Reduce the herds over time, resulting in no livestock**: This option would require fathering and selling young horses, those three years old and younger, and fertility control of remaining animals, allowing most horses and the longhorn steers to “live out their lives in the park.”
Maintain non-reproductive herds, move longhorns north: This would involve gathering and selling young horses and controlling fertility of remaining horses, releasing them to “live out their lives in the park.” A group of 15 to 30 non-reproductive horses would be placed in a new pasture in the south unit for visitor viewing and “maintained at determined numbers” by introducing new, non-reproductive animals. Longhorns would be placed in a new pasture in the north unit, separate from bison, and maintained at five to 15 head by periodically introducing non-reproductive animals.

- **Maintain non-reproductive herds, move longhorns to Elkhorn**: A variation of maintaining non-reproductive herds would place the longhorns in a new pasture at the Elkhorn unit, where Roosevelt’s Elkhorn Ranch cabin once stood, located between the north and south units.

- **Maintain reproductive herds of horses and cattle**: This would involve gathering and selling some young horses, fertility control of part of the herd and maintaining a “representative group” of reproductive horses roaming the south unit. The horse herd would be maintained at 30 to 70 head through reproduction and introduction of new reproductive animals. The longhorns would be placed in a new pasture in the north unit, separate from the bison, and maintained at 15 to 40 head by introducing reproductive animals over time. A genetic management plan would be developed for both species.

- **Maintain non-reproductive horse herd and remove cattle**: This would require gating and selling young horses and fertility control of remaining horses, releasing most at large in the south unit. Horse numbers would be maintained at 30 to 70 by introducing additional non-reproductive animals, while longhorns would be removed from the park.
These three horses are members of the herd of wild horses that roam Theodore Roosevelt National Park in western North Dakota. Forum file photo

An advocate said the park’s wild horse herd should be large enough to allow for a genetically healthy herd.

Chris Kman of Chasing Horses Wild Horse Advocates said Gus Cothran, an acknowledged equine geneticist, has said the herd’s size should be at least 120 horses to prevent inbreeding and other problems from a lack of genetic diversity.
Genetics to preserve important traits and bloodlines should guide decisions to cull the herd, she said. For years, the park service has treated mares with a contraceptive drug largely focused on the horses that were easiest to target, exacerbating inbreeding problems, Kman said.

“We’re asking them to use science,” she said.

Despite her concerns about what she sees as the park’s lack of management for the genetic health of the horse herd, Kman welcomes the new livestock management plan and the public input that will be part of the process.

“All in all, it’s good,” she said. “We’re citing it as a win. It’s been 70 years in the making. We have to make sure it’s done right now.”

In years past, the National Park Service has considered the horses an invasive species, because they are not considered native wildlife species like bison or elk and have not been properly valued by park officials, even though they are hugely popular with the public, Kman said.

“The public really needs to respond to this and make their voices heard,” she said.

**Opportunities for involvement**

Those wishing to attend the virtual public meeting about the management plan for the horses and longhorns at Theodore Roosevelt National Park must register online in advance at [https://empsi.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Xm0AeNRoQ5G2-9NAwDEC5Q](https://empsi.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Xm0AeNRoQ5G2-9NAwDEC5Q).

After registering, participants will receive a confirmation email with details about joining the meeting.
Public comments can be made until April 15 and must be made online through the Planning, Environment and Public Comment website at https://parkplanning.nps.gov/parkHome.cfm?parkID=167.

Comments also can be mailed to Superintendent, Theodore Roosevelt National Park, P.O. Box 7, Medora, N.D., 58645.
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