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A Future for Plants and Horses

KAIMANAWA WILD HORSE RANGE

The government has approved a plan for the future management of the Kaimanawa wild horses, after four years and approximately 4800 public submissions. The herd roams over an area of mostly army land, southeast of Tongariro National Park. The plan is to retain a managed herd of about 500 horses in as wild a state as possible and protection for the environment. The 1996 Coalition Agreement includes a strategy for a muster and sale of horses.

Who developed the plan?

The working party, which developed the draft plan, had representatives from the Kaimanawa Wild Horse Preservation Society, Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, Rangitikei/Hawkes Bay Conservation Board and the Department of Conservation. Public comments received on the 1991 draft plan and on the 1995 draft plan were assessed and incorporated into the final plan. In total, the views of some 4000 individuals were given consideration.

Why the need for management?

The herd is increasing in number without any controls. It is about ten times larger than it was in 1979. Numbering about 1700, the horses have taken a heavy toll on the environment. Fragile and unique wetlands and tussocklands and many special plants are under threat. Much of the area where the horses live has not been farmed for decades or ever converted to pasture. It therefore contains many native plants and plant communities that have now been lost elsewhere. The area is also geologically and climatically unusual. As a result it has many special plants, including at least 16 species which have a nationally threatened or local conservation status. Eleven species, including three threatened species, are known only in the wild horse range in the North Island. One was discovered in 1996 and others might yet be waiting to be found.

What does the plan say?

The plan is to remove all the horses from the northern area of their current range where most of the special plants are. The herd will be reduced to 500 horses in the southern area and research over the next three years will find out if such a number can be sustained by the environment there. The plan requires that horse welfare issues remain paramount so that in removing horses, the principles of humaneness are adhered to.

Why only 500?

The working party that developed the plan took advice from geneticists who say that because the herd is not a distinct breed, 300 horses is enough to ensure the sustainability of their genetic material. However, a herd of 500 horses has been accepted as limiting damage to the environment.



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

What about genetics?

Research by Kentucky University in America assisted by Massey University geneticists has shown the horses are not genetically significant. Most like the Thoroughbred breed, they are mixed breed horses with diverse genetic influences:

What about a census?

A count is necessary for population control management, but will not forstall the need for a muster. The central issue is the impact the horses are having on the fragile landscape and vegetation and the need to take steps to reverse this damage. This year a thorough count by DOC staff and independent observers using a combination of methods recorded 1700 horses. These included the aerial "strip search" method used in previous years, supported by three other techniques.

Is contraception, fencing or relocation an option?

Immuno-contraception has been trialed since 1994 and while it has proved unsuccessful at this stage, it is regarded as a desirable long term measure. After an initial reduction in herd size immuno-contraception may sustain the horse population at a lower level. Immuno-contraception will not reduce the herd however until there is significant adult mortality. Since the plants and landscape need to be protected now, other forms of population control must be used.

Fencing would be impractical because of the vast, rugged terrain and extremes of weather in the area. Fencing all the sensitive parts of the horse range would be equivalent to the Department of Conservation's national annual fencing programme. It would restrict the effectiveness of army training, require regular maintenance and could pose a danger to horses. Horses would still have to be removed from behind the fences.

Relocation is only a possibility if a suitable area were available. No such area is known. Neither relocation nor fencing address the problem of an ever-growing herd.

Will the horses be protected and free?

A main aim of the plan is to keep some horses as wild and free as possible to retain their intrinsic values appreciated by many New Zealanders. They will have the same protection as other animals under the Animal Protections Act. A Kaimanawa Wild Horse Trust will be set up to oversee the health and welfare of the herd and provide independent expert advice on the implementation of the plan for the Minister of Conservation and the department. The army restricts access to its land, preventing unauthorised interference with the herd.

Who will manage the herd?

The Department of Conservation will continue to manage the horses while research continues over the next three years. Ultimately if the horses remain on army land the army will manage them with advice from the department, in consultation with the Kaimanawa Wild Horse Trust. The army already has a land management plan and aims to protect the special plant areas. It does not allow activities which could damage the particularly fragile areas in the northern zone.

(See also Fact sheet: Plants at Risk)