

Forest Service scraps plan to round up Salt River horses

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The U.S. Forest Service is abandoning a controversial plan to remove dozens of horses from their Salt River habitat and is searching for alternatives, the supervisor of the Tonto National Forest said in a statement Thursday.

"There is no plan," Forest Service spokeswoman Carrie Templin said Thursday. "We are stepping back to see what we can do."

The stunning about-face by the Forest Service comes less than 24 hours after Tonto Supervisor Neil Bosworth had postponed the horses' removal at least until the start of the congressional session in September.

The Forest Service has come under withering pressure from protesters, Arizona elected officials and attorneys -- one lawsuit has been filed to block the roundup, another is being considered.

Templin said pressure from the public and politicians led to the scuttling of the roundup of the estimated 65 to 100 horses.

"It was just the outcry," she said.

Bosworth issued this statement Thursday:

"We appreciate the local community's feedback and we've decided to take another look at the proposed gathering of stray horses at Tonto National Forest. The Forest Service will continue to engage with the local community, state and federal officials to explore potential alternatives for meeting our obligations for both land stewardship and public safety."

Sen. Jeff Flake's office had provided the Bosworth statement to 12 News earlier in the day. Flake and Sen. John McCain issued a joint statement Thursday:

"Today's decision by the Forest Service is a step in the right direction, but the agency must now engage with the growing number of Arizonans who are deeply concerned about this issue, and respond to the questions we asked in our letter yesterday."

Legal notice of the removal was given two weeks ago; the roundup could have started Friday, but the Forest Service said it had not yet hired a contractor to remove the horses.

The Forest Service says it has no legal authority over the horses, which it says are stray animals that present a safety hazard.

Horse advocates say they were blindsided by the planned roundup. The horses, they say, have lived in the Salt River habitat for 80 years or more and have become symbols of Arizona for visitors to the recreation area at Saguaro Lake.