



Feds step back from plans to remove Arizona's famous Salt River horses

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The US Forest Service is stepping back from plans to muster Arizona's famous Salt River Wild Horses and sell them at auction.

The reversal follows a huge campaign in the US driven through social media to save the 100 or so horses that live along the Salt River in Tonto National Forest.

The Forest Service posted a formal notice on July 31 advising that an operation to muster the horses could begin as soon as Friday.

Now, the plan is being revisited, delighting the thousands of people who have voiced their support for the horses, which can frequently be seen wading into the flowing water to graze on the river grasses.

Tonto National Forest supervisor Neil Bosworth said in a statement: “We appreciate the local community’s feedback and we’ve decided to take another look at the proposed gathering of stray horses on the 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.”

However, the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group, which has been central to the campaign to keep the horses in their habitat, wants more clarity around Bosworth’s brief statement.

President Simone Netherlands has written to him asking whether this meant that the roundup was permanently canceled, and whether it meant the agency would re-examine the group’s humane management proposal for the horses.

The group earlier developed an extensive management plan for the horses, which includes a birth control strategy to keep the numbers in check, which it had put to the Forest Service. The late-July announcement of the muster amounted to a rejection of the plan.

The announcement of the Forest Service muster plans created an outcry in social, and drew lawmakers from across the political spectrum into the debate.

Several Senators and Representatives wrote to officials asking them to revisit the question, and Arizona Governor Doug Ducey tweeted his support for the horses: “Feds should leave our free roaming #wildhorses alone. But if they don’t, #AZ will do everything we can to protect them & provide sanctuary.”

The horses, which have lived in the area for nearly a century, are not protected under the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, which applies only to mustangs living in formally recognized management areas.

The Salt River Wild Horse Management Group and its president also pursued legal avenues, filing a lawsuit in a bid to have the roundup stopped.

As pressure on the Forest Service mounted, it was announced that the muster would be delayed until at least September. Then, just 24 hours later, the decision to revisit the whole operation was announced.