

Mass cull: 'It should never have come to this'

Fallout from the bushfires will see 17,000 wild horses destined for the knackery or shot in trap yards as battle erupts.

By RICKY FRENCH

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Brumbies, having survived the January bushfires, are moving into parts of Kosciuszko National Park that are home to critical endangered wildlife. Picture: Sean Davey

As many as 17,000 wild horses are destined for the knackery or to be shot in trap yards as the feral animal population spills over into critically endangered wildlife habitat in bushfire-ravaged Kosciuszko National Park.

It is a situation that could have been avoided if the NSW government had enacted a 2016 management plan rather than enshrining feral horse protection in legislation, according to leading authorities.

NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean announced on Wednesday that about 4000 feral horses would be removed from three wildlife habitat areas, covering about 57ha, in the north of the park, a move applauded by conservationists but condemned by supporters of feral horses.

According to a government spokesman, horses will be removed from the Nungar Plain and numbers will be "reduced substantially" on Coleman Plain and parts of Boggy and Kiandra plains. It is not clear what fate awaits the horses and the spokesman said rehoming would be a priority, but "some would go to the knackery".

Years of lobbying and political pressure from a small but vocal group of feral horse supporters in the Snowy Mountains has curtailed effective management of horses, allowing their numbers to rocket to an estimated 20,000, up from an estimated 6000 five years ago.

A draft management plan by the NSW government in 2016 proposed reducing the number of horses to 600 over 20 years, but this was rejected in favour of the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Bill, which was

passed into law in 2018. But with the feral horse population increasing at a rate of 23 per cent a year, the do-nothing approach has come crashing down.

Deputy Premier and local Nationals MP John Barilaro, who introduced the “Brumby Bill”, said he supported the removal of horses in the three key areas.

“The commitment we made to reduce the (overall) horse numbers to a population of 3000 still stands,” he said.

Others say it should never have come to this. Jamie Pittock, professor at Australian National University’s Fenner School of Environment and Society, said: “The deaths of so many feral horses will lie squarely at the feet of the so-called brumby protection people.

“Their misguided actions have resulted in years of dithering by the NSW government, which means thousands more horses will die.”

In January, Professor Pittock flew over Kosciuszko National Park in a helicopter and saw horses in the habitat of endangered species, including the northern corroboree frog, alpine she-oak skink and stocky galaxias fish.

Feral horses are thought to have come through the bushfires largely unscathed and are now concentrated in certain areas.

“We saw herds of horses already knocking off the green pick,” Professor Pittock said. “This prevents the re-establishment of the plant species. Vegetation not re-establishing means sediment is more easily eroded and it risks clogging up the stream environment.

“That vegetation is also the habitat of the alpine she-oak skink and the broad-toothed rat, who need the tussock and grass in order to tunnel into to hide from predators, and for nesting.”

Invasive species conservation officer Candice Bartlett visited the park this week and found herds of horses on the Snowy Mountains Highway near the historic former goldmining town of Kiandra, which was destroyed in the January bushfires.

“The bushfires have triggered an urgent conservation response,” she said. “This is a critical time to get on top of threats to the park, and that includes environmental degradation from huge numbers of feral horses. The complete removal of feral horses from the most sensitive areas of the park is a timely decision from the NSW government.”

Community and scientific advisory panels were set up under the direction of the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act to provide advice to the Environment Minister on the management of horses. It is understood the minister spoke with the heads of the two panels after a joint meeting on February 14 and has acted in accordance with their recommendations to remove horses from the most sensitive areas.



Conservation officer Candice Bartlett near Kiandra. Picture: Sean Davey

Jill Pickering, from the Australian Brumby Alliance, said she was saddened by the minister’s decision, as it meant many horses would be killed, but added that she would support “agreed numbers being retained in the national park and to have numbers lowered in the most sensitive areas”.

She said rehoming should be a priority but admitted there was limited capacity for that option.

“Rehomers in the past have taken around 200 annually, so the rate of removal will guide the number rehomed,” she said.

“The downside is many current rehomers are drought-, fire- or flood-affected, with no fencing infrastructure or feed. Inevitably, many of the 4000 brumbies removed will end up at the knackeries.”

What to do with the horses is now the big question.

“We prefer horses that are going to be killed be euthanased on the spot rather than trucked and killed,” Ms Pickering said.

The view is shared by animal welfare experts. Aerial shooting is widely considered the most humane way of culling, but is unlikely to be endorsed due to the lingering fallout of the last aerial cull held on NSW public land, at Guy Fawkes National Park in the north of the state in 2000.

Despite an independent report finding the cull to be humane and professional, a public backlash led then Labor environment minister Bob Debus to announce a halt to the practice. It remains an option for the current Environment Minister, but few believe he will dare go there.

The scientific advisory panel is expected to recommend shooting horses in trap yards within the park. There is one more joint meeting between the two advisory groups due in April before their advice is officially provided to the minister.