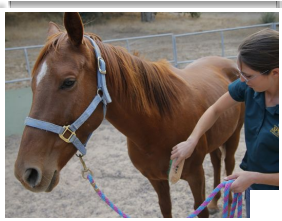


Drought leads to increase in abandoned horses

Leigh Cooper 8:31 p.m. PDT October 24, 2014



(Photo: Juan Villa/The Salinas Californian)

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When Swift's owners surrendered her to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for Monterey County, she was 150 pounds underweight. The 5-year-old mare's jagged teeth, overgrown hooves and heavy parasite load required attention. Today, her coat shines after eating a steady, healthy diet, and her good performance during training exercises has

led to her availability for adoption.

The SPCA rescues animals like Swift when their owners cannot care for them. Although the number of horses rescued started to increase a decade ago from roughly five animals a year to more than 40 as people faced economic challenges, there is a new driving force behind owners surrendering their horses – the drought.

"With hay prices increasing so dramatically, we were expecting, and sadly have seen, more horses being surrendered, because their owners can't care for them," said Beth Brookhouser, director of community outreach at SPCA.

Of the 16 rescued horses this year, some of the abandoned horses have been adopted, others rehabilitated. The SPCA has sent four of the younger horses to training prior to being placed for adoption. Deeming other horses too sick or lame to live comfortably, the agency euthanized them.

Because the drought has made growing hay in California cost-prohibitive, feed stores must ship in hay from other states.

"It's supply and demand, and there isn't much of a supply," said Jonathan Gittlein, market reporter with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Colorado Department of Agricultural Market News. "If you are buying it straight out of a field in Nevada for 200 bucks a ton, you have to tack on \$40 for delivery."

At this point, it takes \$100 to \$250 a month to feed a horse. Many inexperienced owners buy horses believing they can survive on grass from a pasture, but horses require supplemental foods, teeth cleanings, hoof care, and veterinary checks.

"During these (drought) conditions, horses that maybe living OK on the grasses and weeds in the pasture have problems – those grasses and weeds are gone," Brookhouser said.

Financial pressures from increasing hay prices have extended to boarding businesses – such as Monterey Bay Equestrian Center operated by Madaline Mastroianni – where fewer people have horses to board.

"You have to make that up somewhere," Mastroianni said. "We had to go up on our board."

Brookhouser asked the public to call the SPCA if a horse appears to be undernourished. SPCA's humane officers respond to the calls, investigating more than 800 cases of animal cruelty and neglect in Monterey County last year.

"That's where the majority of our horses come from," Brookhouser said.

The SPCA has not experienced an influx of other animals like alpacas or goats that also eat hay because, she speculated, there are comparatively so many more horses in Monterey County. Even so, the agency stays busy caring for its current charges.

"It's very expensive to care for all the horses," Brookhouser said. "but that's part of our mission and it's supported by our donors."

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