

## 71 wild horses die at Tonopah Test Range

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Nitrate contamination killed 71 wild horses last month along a dry lake bed on the Tonopah Test Range, enraging wild horse advocates who called Tuesday for full disclosure of how the deaths occurred.

And although the source of the contamination hasn't been confirmed by Air Force and Bureau of Land Management investigators, one former worker at the test range says he knows how the nitrate got there: illegal dumping of nitrate compounds used in the de-icing of planes and a nearby runway.

The Tonopah Test Range airfield is about a mile northwest of where the horses' carcasses were found. The high desert airfield, 210 miles northwest of Las Vegas, has been a destination for commuter aircraft that shuttle workers from the Las Vegas Valley to remote sites where tests of stealth aircraft and other high-tech aircraft have been conducted.

"I know what the root cause was," said former Air Force tech sergeant Kevin Dye. "It was runway de-icing fluid because that's what we used to put on the runways up there, ammonium nitrate.

"They used ammonium nitrate and other chemicals. It just runs off into the desert," Dye said.

He was reacting to an Aug. 10 Bureau of Land Management statement that says "nitrate toxicity is the most likely cause of death" for the horses on the Nellis range area.

"High levels of nitrates were found in some water samples taken from a pond the horses used for drinking on a dry lake bed," reads the statement from the BLM's state office in Reno. The levels were at least 66 times in excess of safe drinking standards for humans and 30 times acceptable levels for livestock.

Dye said dumping of ammonium nitrate, ammonium phosphate and other chemicals was routine when he worked there from 1990 to 1998.

"This time of year is when they clean out the de-icing tanker trunks. They just pull them up to the fence and wash them out and let it run off into the desert," Dye said. He noted that there is "no water reclamation system up there."

He reported the environmental compliance issue to Environmental Protection Agency Special Agent in Charge Scott West in 1996 but the EPA took no action.

Similarly, the EPA has declined to provide answers for a Freedom of Information Act request from the Review-Journal regarding West's investigation of environmental compliance from 1996 to

1998 at the Nellis range complex, including the classified Area 51 installation along the dry Groom Lake bed.

That's where former workers have said toxic stealth coatings were burned in open pits in violation of environmental laws for federal facilities. Fumes from the smoke exposed them to dioxins that caused sometimes fatal cancers, according to former workers and widows of former workers who sought but have been denied compensation in a federal lawsuit.

Wild horse advocates reacted bitterly to the news Tuesday that high levels of nitrates were found at the Tonopah Test Range watering hole and in the blood and eye fluid from horse carcasses.

"This is kind of sad. Somebody needs to get to the bottom of this," said Jerry Reynoldson, president of Wild Horses 4 Ever. "There are too many odd things here.

"They may cite national security concerns but that's a stretch. Somebody dumped chemicals up there.

"If they're letting stuff run out there, that deserves some oversight by somebody. The potential for this to do other damage is still there," Reynoldson said.

Laurie Howard, a local member America's Wild Horse Advocates, said the situation at the Tonopah Test Range is "horrible and scary. ... It's pretty significant to have that many animals die and then they don't know what happened."

Other wildlife might have died from drinking the water, she said. "If it gets into the water table, my gosh, how serious is that?"

A Nellis spokesman, Capt. Justin McVay, said the base's civil engineers who are probing the horse deaths along with the BLM don't know the nitrate's source.

"Until the investigation is complete, I don't think they'll speculate on what the root cause is," he said Tuesday.

Dye said one of the main ingredients in the de-icing fluids used at the Tonopah airfield is urea, a white crystal that's 46 percent nitrogen and breaks down into nitrate after it has been applied to runways and aircraft.

He referred to Air Force regulations for snow and ice control that say it is mandatory for the environmental flight commander or chief "to provide storm water management to minimize potential impact of aircraft and airfield de-icing chemicals."

Nitrate levels in the water where the horses were found were more than 3,000 parts per million, far in excess of the safe drinking water standard for humans of less than 45 parts per million.

"Acute nitrate toxicity in horses is not well understood and there haven't been many instances of it reported," the BLM news release reads. "There is no indication the problem is attributable to a

contagious or infectious disease.

“Tests conducted for salts, heavy metals and algae toxin have not identified other concerns. The pattern of the deaths, the test results and that the deaths stopped when the water hole was fenced off, all suggest that nitrates in the water is the cause of death.”

Dante Pistone, a spokesman for the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection, said the division’s staff hasn’t received any information from Nellis and the BLM, the lead agencies in the investigation.

Airports that use de-icing fluids must apply to the division’s Bureau of Water Pollution Control for an industrial storm-water permit.

“Before that permit is issued, they would have to submit ... a plan detailing how they plan to handle the de-icing fluids to keep them out of the waters of the state,” he wrote in an e-mail Tuesday.

He confirmed that both Nellis Air Force Base and McCarran International Airport have permits that cover de-icing fluids.

“Since we haven’t seen any data or reports from BLM or Nellis, it’s impossible for us to know the source of the contaminant in this case, if indeed it’s not naturally occurring,” Pistone wrote.