

Trespass Horse Issue

Background: Early in fiscal year 2000, the state Commission of Agriculture and Forestry, in conjunction with the US Dept. of Agriculture requested that Fort Polk develop a plan to test horses on Fort Polk for Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA). EIA is an infectious and incurable disease. The state believes that the population of trespass horses on federal property was and is a contributing factor in the spread of EIA in this area. Horses infected with EIA must be destroyed.

It is estimated that as many as 300 trespass horses roam property used for military training at Fort Polk. In response to the state's request, Fort Polk officials developed a plan to capture and test the horses for EIA. A local humane group had agreed to find adoptive owners for horses that tested negative for EIA and didn't belong to anyone.

In December of 2000 before the post could begin rounding up the horses, the Coalition of Louisiana Animal Advocates filed a federal lawsuit to block the roundup of the horses. The lawsuit resulted in a legal settlement that upheld the status of the horses as trespass animals and required Fort Polk to conduct an Environmental Assessment (EA) before taking any action regarding the horses.

The State Department of Agriculture and Forestry continues to request that horses on Fort Polk be tested for EIA. In addition, these horses are at continuous risk of injury or death because of ongoing military training activities to include live fire exercises in the Fort Polk training area. They are in constant danger of training devices such as concertina wire, excavations, live fire exercises, and military vehicles. The horses often wander onto airstrips and drop zones posing a potential danger to airborne personnel and aircraft.

It also appears that the trespass horses have negative environmental impacts on Army-owned lands used for military training activities. The Army has found that the horses can be detrimental to ongoing environmental management activities, such as vegetative reestablishment for purposes of erosion control.

It is not feasible to return the horses to the training ranges because the post does not have the means for yearly capture and testing of the animals in accordance with the state's request.

No decision on any actions regarding the horses or the disposition of the horses will be made until after completion of the EA and careful consideration of issues of concern and reasonable alternative actions identified by the public, appropriate government, and subject matter experts. Fort Polk was and will continue to be committed to the safe, responsible, and humane treatment of the horses.

Key Points to Stress:

This issue must be addressed for several reasons:

- The State Dept. of Agriculture and Forestry has requested these horses be tested for Equine Infectious Anemia.
- The horses continue to be at risk of injury or death due to military training activities.
- The horses hamper soil erosion control efforts by consuming vegetative cover reestablishments.
- A legal settlement has mandated an Environmental Assessment.

No decision on any actions regarding the horses or the disposition of the horses will be made until after completion of the EA and careful consideration of issues of concern and reasonable alternative actions identified by the public, appropriate government agencies, and subject matter experts.

The Army encourages public input on this issue as well as the participation of animal welfare groups and other subject matter experts in developing an appropriate course of action in regard to this issue.

Fort Polk will remain committed to humane and responsible treatment of the horses in whatever actions are taken.

Public Involvement Opportunities:

Public Comment Period – April 15 – May 15 2004

Public Scoping Meetings - Public meetings will be held in Leesville, LA and Baton Rouge, LA to receive public input on issues of concern and alternative courses of action. The Leesville meeting will be held from 3-6 p.m. Tuesday, April 13 in the Landmark Hotel, 3080 Colony Blvd. The Baton Rouge meeting will be held from 3-6 p.m. Thursday, April 15 in the AmeriSuites Hotel, 6080 Bluebonnet Blvd. These meetings will be conducted in an “open house” type forum at which information booths will be established and public comment forms made available. The public can come and go at their convenience during the three-hour timeframe of the meetings.

Additional information is available at <http://www.jrtc-polk.army.mil/horses/index.htm>