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Copter crashes; horses set free

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THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK - Wild horses were set free Thursday after the helicopter rounding them up crashed alongside the corral, sending the pilot and passenger to the hospital with minor injuries and leaving park staff stunned and uncertain how to proceed.

The experienced pilot from Elko, Nev., had safely worked other animal roundups for this park and other national parks.

Superintendent Valerie Naylor said the crash at the park's wildlife handling facility north of Fryburg was "definitely a shock."

The crash happened late morning after the pilot, Ted McBride, and park biologist Mike Oehler had already chased in three bands of horses - about 50 in all - from out in the Badlands and were working a large group up a narrow chute.

Naylor said the incident would be investigated by the federal Department of Interior, and she wouldn't comment on what caused the helicopter to crash.

The helicopter was forcing about 30 horses up the chute formed by two tall wire fences when apparently, according to onlookers, a skid caught the fence and flipped the copter on its side outside the chute.

It hit the ground from a relatively low height of maybe 10 feet, crashing to the pilot's side of the glassed-in cockpit. Onlookers and park personnel ran to the scene, hearing first the crunch of the crash and seeing a puff of either smoke or dust and the rotor blade hurling through the air.

Ambulances from Belfield and Dickinson took McBride and Oehler to the Dickinson hospital.

Naylor said she talked to Oehler before the ambulance left, and "he said he was fine."

Frank Kuntz, who has purchased many park horses over the years to preserve what he believes is a historic Nokota horse breed, said he'd never seen a helicopter force horses up the narrow chute into a round pen.

Naylor said she didn't know whether the helicopter's position was unusual. "They do what they have to do to bring the horses in," she said.

After the ambulances headed down the gravel road toward Dickinson, Naylor conferred with park staff. She announced the roundup would be canceled for the year and the 50 horses quietly pacing in unaccustomed enclosure would be set free.

Oehler had hoped to bring in all 125 of the wild horses and cull out 75 to sell Monday at Stockmen's Livestock in Dickinson.

Now that sale is canceled.

Naylor said the horses brought in before the crash were a mix of horses the park planned to sell and some it planned to keep, and thus not enough to make a public sale feasible.

The herd will grow by two dozen or so new foals before another roundup next fall.

Marylou and Henry Weber, volunteers who help Oehler keep track of the horses and help select those to be sold, said the cancelled roundup will make next year's roundup and sale that much more difficult.

Henry Weber said he'd pray for rain to keep all the park's horses, bison, elk and other animals in high grass for another season.

After the unprecedented drama of the crash and within a few hours of being rounded up, the wild horses were shooed back out of the corrals.

They circled until a lead horse led them through the opening in the fence and back out to their home ground once again.

It had been something to watch them come galloping into captivity, beautiful in their wildness and mix of color and size.

It was something to watch them gallop back out into the wild, reprieved and free for a while longer.

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