

Sheriff seizes malnourished horses, donkeys

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Thirty-two horses and five donkeys were seized from a rural Elmore County residence at Tipanuk last week, with the owners charged with permitting the animals to go without care.

Charged with four counts of the misdemeanor offense were Zach Robinson, 23, and Sherri Hopson, 52. Debra Hopson, described by authorities as Robinson's common-law wife, also was charged with two counts of cruelty to animals, involving "7-10 cats and 8-9 dogs that were all malnourished," according to Elmore County Sheriff's Office detective Mike Barclay.

Barclay said the state vet and a local veterinarian, Dr. Waddops, were present to confirm the condition of the animals and to approve the seizure. The state uses a "body score" index to rate the health of a horse. Normal is in the 4-6 range, but the horses seized last week primarily scored only a one or a 3. "A one (rating)," Barclay said, "is basically a sack of bones."

Barclay said the seizure of the horses and donkeys, some of whom were so malnourished their ribs were showing and had numerous sores on their bodies, resulted from an investigation that began last April when neighbors called in a complaint.

Authorities usually try to work with individuals they investigate for possible animal abuse. "The protocol is usually to give them 30-60 days to bring up the body scores to acceptable levels," Barclay said, noting that if properly fed, a malnourished horse can usually recover one score point every 30 days.

Last April, Barclay said he found a number of malnourished animals on the property, and some of the donkeys had not had their hooves trimmed, the hooves curling up into spirals 6-12 inches long.

The sheriff's office had the hooves trimmed and insisted adequate hay be placed on the ground for the animals and that they be wormed. Barclay said the owners of the horses and donkeys complied with the request and he monitored the animals for the next two months. But other matters (including a murder investigation) caused him to discontinue the monitoring program.

Then, a few weeks ago, a county commissioner received a complaint that the animals again were not being properly taken care of. Barclay went back and found no hay on the ground. He insisted the animals be properly fed, and went back a week later and found 22 bales of hay had been provided.

But a follow-up check showed no additional hay had been put out and the animals were eating sticks and stems.

"Finally, we had to draw the line," he said. With the concurrence of the state vet the animals were seized and taken to an Idaho Humane Society shelter-coral in Boise. At least one horse, suffering from a seriously inflamed ligament near the fetlock, was put down last week.

The rest, Barclay said, will probably recover and eventually will be sold by the Humane Society to cover costs associated with the seizure and boarding of the animals. Details can be found on the society's web site.

Barclay said the Idaho Humane Society stepped in because there was no adequate facility in Elmore County to handle that many animals, "and they've had experience with large seizure operations in the past." He thanked them for their efforts in helping save the horses.

Barclay said the sheriff's office would not be seeking jail time for the two people accused of mistreating the horses, but rather would ask for fines and restrictions on their ability to have animals in their possession.

He said they did not seem to be deliberately mistreating the animals.

"Some people have what we call 'hoarding disease.' They like taking care of animals and take in more than they can

handle. They figure they'll doctor them up and sell them, later. But they run out of money, and the animals wind up suffering as a result.

"You'd need at least two or three tons of hay a month to feed this many horses, and they just couldn't financially support all these animals," Barclay said.

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