

NMCGA on the Trail...

For immediate release: February 28, 2023

Forest Service concludes aerial gunning, killing 19 head

By: Taylor Riggins, NMCGA

Another round of aerial slaughter of estray cattle in the Gila Wilderness came to an end today. Over a three-day operation, the United States Forest Service (USFS) with a contracted APHIS Wildlife Services shooter reported to have killed 19 head. As stated in a release from the Gila National Forest (GNF) today, the entire project area was searched by naked eye and thermal imagery, and no additional cattle were seen. Temporary closure of the operation area will end tomorrow, March 1st.

“What a waste of taxpayers’ money,” said Loren Patterson, President NMCGA. “Reporting 19 head killed over several days of flight just shows that the United States Forest Service has absolutely no idea about the actual herd numbers in the Wilderness, and has no evidence to support its claims that a herd of 150 head was causing dire terror and environmental damage. The environmental organization the USFS apparently listens to has failed it.”

In a press release this afternoon, GNF Supervisor Camille Howes expressed their commitment to working collaboratively with the ranching community saying the “Gila National Forest will continue to coordinate with permittees in their efforts to locate, gather and remove their branded cattle from areas where they are not authorized.” This statement of willingness to coordinate and cooperate falls flat. For over a year, NMCGA has met with the USFS on a monthly basis to offer solutions to avoid lethal aerial slaughter. The USFS was not interested, preferring aerial slaughter to common sense approach.

Solutions that NMCGA offered included a request to give a recent New Mexico Livestock Board (NMLB) directive a year to show whether it would be effective. The directive would authorize any valid allotment owner within the Gila National Forest and the Gila Wilderness to gather unbranded cattle, hold them for proper inspection and purchase them from the NMLB. Another proposal was to ask the USFS to allocate funds to repair existing infrastructure in the Wilderness to facilitate humane gathering of the cattle. Those facilities would aid in holding captured cattle as well as serve a useful purpose for the use of bait traps with salt blocks, water or feed.

“Traditional methods in the hands of skilled cattlemen have proved useful in reducing the number of estray cattle across New Mexico,” said Patterson. “Unless the Forest Service takes an internal look at their lack of infrastructure and is willing to turn to long-term tried and true solutions, estray cattle will move back into the area and these expensive aerial gunning operations will have accomplished nothing.”