

More than 800 animals re-homed in sanctuary 'failure'

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CORVALLIS, - Western Montana Equine Rescue founder Shannon Alexander took in her first donkey this year.

"She's 17 plus. I think she's probably older than that," Alexander thought. "I just thought, she needed a place where she can be pampered and have her own stall kind of have her own run of the place. She's really happy here."

Alexander's donkey, Nan, was the oldest of about 30 donkeys re-homed after the Montana Large Animal Sanctuary and Rescue, near Hot Springs, ran out of money.

The sanctuary's former vice president and primary caretaker, Brian Warrington, said they took in more than 1,000 animals over a 15-year period.

"I finally shut the doors on taking any animals because I saw the handwriting on the wall, the economy was heading and then we lost our major funding on our feed," he said.

The Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS) heard Warrington needed help and executive director Patty Finch called him.

"Listening to what he was saying, I said, 'Would it be helpful if we were able to place some of the animals with other rescues?' And he said, 'Yes, that would be very helpful.'"

National animal care representatives stepped up and state non-profits stepped in. They brought in food first. Then veterinarians.

The adoption process began for llamas, horses, donkeys, etc., more than 800 animals. In fact, the international newspaper ANIMAL PEOPLE called it the "largest-ever sanctuary failure."

"It was definitely the biggest I've ever seen," Finch said.

GFAS asked Alexander to coordinate the donkey adoptions, which involved moving them to Corvallis to get their overgrown hooves trimmed.

"It took a lot of coordination and a lot of effort by a lot of people," Alexander said.

"Really, this many animals; this was quick," Ruana said. "This is really quick for Montana, especially in a cold, cold state in a cold, cold time. I think it went really, really well."

Still, 35 horses remain up for adoption.

GFAS filed an animal cruelty complaint with the Sanders County Sheriff's Office.

"There were several signs even from a great distance that said, things are not right here," Finch said. She said the people-to-animal ratio was much too small and animals didn't have adequate shelter from the cold. She also said new animals were being born every day.

"Animals were reproducing," Finch said. "Sanctuaries must have a strict, no-breeding policy."

Sanders County sheriff Tom Rummell said the investigation is ongoing and the results will go to the county attorney for his review.

Finch said the problems could have been avoided if, instead of a private foundation, the Montana Large Animal Sanctuary and Rescue were converted to a public charity.

"It doesn't take a veterinary degree to look at overgrown hooves on an animal barely able to walk, a camel on its knees because its hooves are so overgrown," she said. "It doesn't take an expert to know something is wrong."

One of the foundation members told Finch they will sell the 400-acre property and disperse the assets to the non-profits that helped out in the rescue.