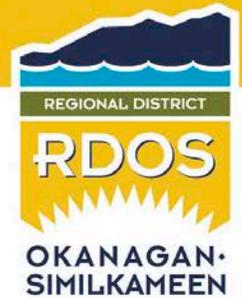


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January 18, 2013

Dear Resident.

West Bench, Sage Mesa, Westwood Properties, or Husula Highlands

As you have probably noticed, the roaming horse problem on the West Bench has been worse this year than in the recent past. This is surprising because the RDOS feeding station program has been fully operational since early December. Recall that the feeding station program involves the delivery of hay to relatively remote locations on Penticton Indian Band (PIB) land during the snowy season. The objective is to attract most of the horses away from populated areas as they come down from the hills looking for food.

Although the feeding station program is fully funded by Area F taxpayers, and although it is not a long term solution to the horse problem, feeding stations are relatively inexpensive, keep the horses from starving, and (until this year) have worked quite well.

There are a few possible reasons for the failure of the feeding stations in the winter of 2012-13. One could be the increased number of horses on the West Bench. Although members of the PIB removed many horses from the area in 2009, nature has since taken its course and the herd has grown appreciably. However, the feeding station program has also grown. The RDOS has contracted with an experienced rancher to establish the locations and periodically replenish the feeding stations. Efforts have been made to create different stations for different herds to avoid territorial conflicts. Thus it is not clear that a larger herd should necessarily cause the feeding station program to fail.

An alternative explanation for the failure of the feeding stations may be the availability of hay, tree fruits, and other food within the populated areas of the West Bench. We have received reports of residents either deliberately feeding the horses or inadvertently feeding them by leaving fallen fruit and other treats in their yards. A moment's reflection should make it clear that feeding the horses does far more harm than good. Encouraging the animals to remain in populated areas increases the likelihood of horse-human conflict, such as a collision with a vehicle or property damage. Moreover, the elevated risk of horse-human conflict increases demands within the community for more drastic horse control measures, such as a cull. Put simply, feeding the horses puts both humans and horses at risk.

The decision we face at the RDOS is whether to continue with the feeding station program or scrap it and reconsider other potential remedies, such as a horse fence, a cull, or mare sterilization. These alternatives are (a) expensive, (b) risky, (c) politically fraught, or (d) all of the above. The decision would be easier if we knew whether feeding by residents is a real issue or merely rumor. You could help us by letting us know whether you have first-hand knowledge of horse feeding within the populated areas of the West Bench. To be clear: this is not about blame. We are not interested in knowing WHO is feeding the horses; rather, we are interested in knowing WHETHER the horses are being fed. We cannot assess the value of the feeding stations without knowing whether the program is being undermined by other food sources.

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If you have first-hand knowledge of horse feeding, please let us know in one of the following ways:

1. Send a short message to info@rdos.bc.ca. RDOS staff will remove identifying information when summarizing the emails.
2. If you prefer to remain absolutely anonymous, you may use the web-based contact form at <http://www.rdos.bc.ca/helpful-links/contact-us/>. The form asks for your name and email but you can use fictitious values. Please make it clear, however, that you are reporting horse feeding so that RDOS staff can keep count.
3. Phone RDOS reception at (250) 492-0237 or toll-free at 1 877 610 3737. Again, the idea here is not to name names but rather let us know whether the feeding problem is widespread.

Let me assure you that RDOS is well aware of the serious risks roaming horses pose to themselves, humans, and property. Our challenge is to figure out how best to solve the problem given significant technological, economic, political, ethical, and legal constraints. Readers of the large and growing file on this problem on the Area F website (<http://areaf.rdos.bc.ca/cms/horses>) know that the horse issue is very complex. The laws of British Columbia state unambiguously that livestock may graze freely on crown range (i.e., PIB lands) and that fencing is the responsibility of those who abut the crown range. Accordingly, under the law no government (including the PIB) has an obligation to keep horses off your property—it is your responsibility to fence your property at your cost. This situation strikes many people as unfair and inefficient and there have been many calls over the last few decades for governments, especially the RDOS, to take a more active role in addressing the West Bench horse problem.

As of this moment, the RDOS does not have a “roaming horse control service”. In other words, you may be paying rural property taxes but these do not fund the full range of services you might enjoy (and pay for) in a municipality. Regional districts in British Columbia are permitted to introduce new services but each service must be funded by those who benefit. Residents must therefore provide explicit authorization for new taxes to be collected to cover the cost of the service. We are currently funding the feeding stations as an experimental pilot project out of our small rural projects budget. However, a more formal and permanent horse control service would require voter assent through a referendum or alternate approval process.

The RDOS plan moving forward is to first attempt to understand why the feeding station program has been less effective this year compared to past years. Based on our findings, we may reconsider some of the more elaborate solutions considered in the past (fence, cull, sterilization, and so on). As always, we will be working closely with the PIB, the provincial government, local animal protection groups, and anyone who has an opinion in our attempts to find a solution.

I thank you in advance for any information or input you may be able to provide.

Michael Brydon
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