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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

SPCA kennel supervisor Nancy Keck feeds young horses small amounts of hay until their strength returns.

Hungry horses are costly guests

By TOM LONG
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SANTA CRUZ — More than 40 horses are being nursed back to health at the Santa Cruz SPCA after being seized from a local horse breeder this week, but the process is proving both costly and complicated.

"This is the biggest case we've heard of other than some race horses that were rescued in San Diego," said Judy Cassada, director of education for the SPCA.

A total of 44 Arabian horses — many with bloated bellies and ribcages showing — were eventually taken from a nearly 400-acre ranch owned by Nezh and Mustafa Sabankaya at 1510 Smith Grade Road in Bonny

Doon. Humane officers began rounding up the horses Tuesday following complaints from people who said the animals looked malnourished.

After taking the weakest of the animals Tuesday, officers returned to round up the others Wednesday. Officers also arrested Nezh Sabankaya on charges of obstructing an officer in the performance of his duty. "They were running around in a jeep, interfering and trying to keep the horses from being rounded up," said Cassada.

Sabankaya was booked into county jail and later released on his own recognizance. Cassada said charges will likely be filed against the Sabankayas later this week, after veteri-

narians and humane officers finish their reports and evaluations of the horses' health.

"The charges that would be filed would be animal cruelty," Cassada said. "It could be a felony, it could be a misdemeanor, it could mean prison."

Sabankaya has denied allegations that the horses were being underfed and said Wednesday he was considering filing a suit against authorities for taking his animals. Sabankaya reportedly owns hundreds more horses that are being kept at his ranch and on other property nearby which authorities say appear to be in good health.

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The particular group that was seized consisted primarily of young geldings, according to Cassada. Authorities charged that the Sabankayas were using a breeding technique that had the young horses fighting over a limited amount of food. As a result, some of the horses appear healthy while others appear malnourished and ill.

"There are always dominant horses that will get the feed and look pretty good," Cassada said. "The rest just didn't have enough."

By Saturday the horses had been divided into groups by health, with the dozen or so weakest being kept together and monitored closely. One black horse had mucus flowing from his nostrils, while a few others seemed barely strong enough to walk. The ribcages of all the weakest were prominent and their bellies were bloated by worms, according to Cassada.

"Anyone who sees the horses will see they're malnourished, so we have a very good case," said Cassada.

Despite their weakened condition, the horses were all willing to fight for hay being handed out by SPCA kennel supervisor Nancy Keck. But Keck said that in their weakened condition their bodies revolt against being fed too much too soon, so they've been put on a program that will slowly build up their strength.

"It's got to be gradual, scientif-

ic," Keck said. "But we'll get them in shape. In six weeks we'll have them back in shape."

After the criminal proceedings are resolved, the horses may be adopted out by the SPCA in the same way dogs or cats are. More than 40 people have already signed up to offer either adoptive or foster homes for the horses.

The SPCA has already spent some \$5,000 caring for the horses, Cassada said, and the cost is expected to climb. The SPCA will keep the horses on acreage it owns behind its main building and portable fences have been brought in to corral and separate them.

"At this point we're just kind of proceeding with getting the feeding, worming and fencing going," said Cassada. "They're going to have to be cared for by us until the end of the criminal case."

Cassada said that case might take months to resolve. In the meantime, the SPCA's finances are going to be sorely taxed and "other programs we have may suffer a lot," she said.

Cassada said donations to help care for the horses can be made to the SPCA and marked for the Arab Horse Fund. The SPCA is also looking for volunteers who have experience working with horses to help out.

The work may not be glamorous, though. "We've got a lot of manure," Cassada said. "We're going to hopefully be able to find some organic farmers to donate it to."