

SPCA seizes exotic horses from ranch

Animal welfare

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BONNY DOON — A herd of exotic Arabian horses was rounded up and carted away Tuesday by authorities from a Bonny Doon horse breeder's ranch after complaints the animals were malnourished.

Armed with a search warrant, state humane officers took 25 horses from the nearly 400-acre spread of Nezhil and Mustafa Sabankaya, at 1510 Smith Grade Road.

The round-up began around 11 a.m. and did not end until sunset. Officers from the SPCA in Santa Cruz, Marin and Santa Clara counties, teamed up with those from the Sheriff's Posse and the Santa Cruz City Department of Parks and Recreation to herd the beasts into waiting trailers.

It was a painstaking operation, authorities said, since the horses were apparently not used to hu-

mans and easily spooked.

Nezhil Sabankaya, 32, told the Sentinel he and his brother raise the Arabian horses for showing around the country and denies they are mistreated.

According to Judy Cassada of the Santa Cruz SPCA, no charges have been filed against the owners and the horses will undergo medical evaluations that include blood tests.

The 25 confiscated horses were all about a year old and appeared to be the most seriously malnourished, she said. It appeared some had worms, judging from their bloated bellies, she said.

The District Attorney's office is reviewing the case.

"Basically the (search warrant) affidavit says their breeding technique is to underfeed the animals and let them fight for food," Assis-

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tant District Attorney Patricia Bazaar said.

"I've seen them galloping around here at 100 miles an hour," Nezhil Sabankaya said. "They run about five to ten miles a day, they're healthy. They are not pigs. I'm raising horses, not pigs."

He said the family-run business spends \$100,000 annually on hay to feed them.

Authorities said the Sabankayas own "in the hundreds" of horses, kept at the property at 1510 Smith Grade Road, and another one farther down the road. According to one official's estimate, up to 60 may be confiscated.

Cassada said the investigation began about a year ago after neighbors called the SPCA complaining the animals looked skinny.

According to the officers, Nezhil Sabankaya had three bales of hay with him when he arrived to feed the animals Tuesday. One officer said that was half the feed necessary to maintain the current

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weight of the herd.

Sabankaya said the reason some of the horses appeared thin was because eight to nine of them had been gelded and had lost weight. They were regaining the lost pounds when officers seized them, he said.

He said he was confident the results of medical tests on the animals will vindicate him. The horse's blood may have to be sent out of state for examination and the results may not be due for several weeks, officers said.

"Just because they see a rib or two they think they're starving to death," he said.

As darkness fell, Sabankaya watched as the officers took the last of the young horses away.

"I love my horses," he said. "I have a lot of them and we're trying various bloodlines. If they don't come out and don't put on good weight, we figure it's a bad line and we don't breed them. We have to try different lines."

Sabankaya complained the officers had violated his rights by trespassing on his property earlier this month. He said they reneged on a promise to meet informally later this month with his veterinarian.

Officers said it was Sabankaya that broke the appointment and that no laws were broken during the investigation.

The horses were taken to the Santa Cruz animal shelter. Two animal control officers were stationed on the property in Bonny Doon overnight and the investigation will continue today.