

# Court threat hangs over Kaimanawa horse cull

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Environment reporter

The Department of Conservation has until 10am on Monday to change its mind on the plan to cull the herd of Kaimanawa wild horses or face legal action.

Ike Hunter of Wanganui, who has a claim before the Waitangi Tribunal to save the horses, said his lawyer wrote to DOC Director-General Bill Mansfield.

The letter asked the department to stop the cull and reinstate the covenant which until recently protected the horses.

It allowed 10 days for a reply.

Mr Hunter said if he was not happy with the department's response he would begin court action to prevent the cull.

The move was to show the department that Maori meant business.

"We are not playing around," Mr Hunter said.

Responding to the letter's demand to stop the cull, DOC Deputy Director-General Murray Hosking said: "We can't stop something which hasn't started."

The working party which produced the cull plan decided protection for the horses under the Wildlife Act was unnecessary once its management plan was implemented, he said.

"The working party agreed the protection notice was no longer needed given the herd's increased population - we are now in a position where we have to manage the horses."

A public meeting to save the herd will be held in Wellington

this weekend. A notice of the meeting states that DOC proposes hunting the horses with Army assistance - "from helicopter gunships if necessary".

DOC has said shooting will be done from the ground and horses would be shot by helicopter as a last resort.

The notice equates the cull with "Canadian seal slaughters and Japanese dolphin massacres".

Mr Hosking said the cull aimed for a compromise - to save an ecologically fragile area north of Waiouru by maintaining a smaller herd of 800 horses in the south.

Estimates of the herd size vary from 1200 to 1800.

A helicopter census of the southern area "will make absolutely sure there are 800 horses there", before the cull begins, said Mr Hosking.

The southern herd is the subject of Massey University contraceptive trials and results are expected shortly.

A contraceptive programme is part of the department's long-term strategy to manage the size of the herd.

An operational plan for the cull is still being put together and will be subject to review, although the cull is expected to take place this winter.

"Until we have a sound and humane operational plan, no action will be taken," said Mr Hosking.

■ Save the Kaimanawa Horses public meeting: Loaves and Fishes hall, Hill Street (by Wellington Cathedral), tomorrow 2pm.