



**NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service**

# **Removal for domestication (rehoming)**

**Feral horse control standard operating  
procedure**





## Acknowledgement of Country

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

This resource may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs or historical content.

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# Background

Feral horses in Australian national parks negatively impact the natural environment, cultural and historic heritage and public safety. NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is committed to managing the negative impacts of feral horses in NSW national parks through implementation of a management control program that is consistent with relevant Commonwealth and/or NSW animal welfare legislation and regulations.

This standard operating procedure (SOP) is specific to NPWS operating on NPWS estate and does not replace or override any New South Wales and Commonwealth legislation. This SOP does not apply where other government agencies undertake feral horse domestication (rehoming) on NPWS estate. In these instances, agencies must adhere to their own SOPs as well as applicable New South Wales and Commonwealth legislation.

The SOP has been based on the Kosciuszko National Park Removal for domestication (rehoming) SOP, which was developed following consultation with RSPCA NSW and relevant specialists. The SOP will be reviewed annually or more often as required.

## Scope of control method

Domestication (also referred to as rehoming or adoption) refers to the process by which a feral horse removed from NPWS tenure is transferred to captivity under the ongoing care and ownership of an approved individual or organisation. That horse is then domesticated or trained (also referred to as 'gentled', 'broken' or 'started') by the adopter (commonly referred to as 'rehome') to become a companion or riding horse living in a domestic setting (i.e. no longer 'wild'). Rehomed horses are not intended for slaughter or processing for meat or by-products, or for use at rodeos or similar events.

Removing a feral horse from a park for domestication usually involves the following steps:

- capture of the horse via passive trapping (NPWS Passive trapping – Feral Horse SOP)
- loading and transporting the horse from the trap yards, unloading and holding at temporary yards, then reloading for transport to an approved rehome
- domestication.

This standard operating procedure covers:

- the loading, unloading and transport of horses removed for domestication
- the temporary holding of horses removed for domestication
- the selection of horses for domestication.

## Key responsibilities during and after rehoming

- A statement of program intent sets out the responsibilities of relevant parties involved in the rehoming program will be developed for each rehoming program and approved by the NPWS Deputy Secretary. These will include:
  - NPWS is responsible for assessing and approving applications to be registered as a rehomer.
  - NPWS is responsible for trapping feral horses, transporting them to NPWS or contracted temporary holding yards and holding horses in the yards until the horses are collected by or on behalf of a rehomer
  - ownership of feral horses, and responsibility for their welfare, transfers to the rehomer on the transportation date – the transportation date is the date on which the horses are loaded onto a transport vehicle and collected by the rehomer (or other person approved by the rehomer) at the NPWS temporary holding yards or other location specified by NPWS
  - rehomers are responsible for the cost of suitable transport from the NPWS temporary holding yards and all ongoing costs and care associated with the rehomed horses to ensure the welfare of those animals
  - NPWS is not responsible for the welfare of horses on and after the transportation date.
- Where multiple horses are requested by an approved rehomer, NPWS should make efforts to provide horses from the same family group.
- All horses that meet the eligibility criteria may be rehomed. An approved home must exist prior to removal from a park (if removing horses for rehoming only).
- A request for horses by an approved rehomer must be made for a minimum of 2 animals. It is at the discretion of the branch director if less than 2 animals can be sent to an approved rehomer.
- NPWS employees are eligible to become rehomers but must adhere to the same approval process and horse selection process as the public. The relevant branch director must endorse the rehoming application.

# Procedures

## Administration

### Applications to be registered as a rehomer

- Only individuals or organisations approved by NPWS are eligible to receive horses for rehoming.
- The NPWS *Domestication (Rehoming) Guidelines* set out requirements for rehoming applications.
- Approval as a registered rehomer will be revoked if a rehomer fails to comply with the guidelines.

## Handling horses

- Before taking part in control operations, all NPWS personnel and its contractors must:
  - be experienced in the handling of stock and/or feral horses
  - complete a NPWS-specific (online) course on feral horse control.
- Within the first 3 months of participating (under supervision of an approved person) in their first operation under this SOP, all personnel must:
  - have their skills and experience assessed and approved by:
    - a relevant animal biologist or veterinarian with animal welfare and/or feral horse expertise
    - a NPWS staff member that has already had their skills and experience assessed and approved by a relevant animal biologist or veterinarian with animal welfare and/or feral horse expertise
  - demonstrate that they have completed a low-stress stock handling course within the last 3 years.
- Any personnel that have not participated in an operation under this SOP in the prior 3 years will be required to re-satisfy the criteria in the 2 points above.
- Horses should be approached slowly and quietly, utilising an ‘approach and retreat’ method to calmly habituate the horses to human presence.
- Verbal communication between personnel should be used only when deemed necessary. If used, voices should remain quiet and calm.
- Horses should be moved using body language wherever possible. In some cases, a horse may balk and will not move forward from body language alone. In these cases, a pole (or similar) may be gently used, making contact with the horse only if necessary. Horses should move gently in response to personnel.
- An audit of the transport, temporary holding, loading and unloading of horses will occur annually. The audit must be conducted by a relevant specialist or veterinarian with animal welfare and/or feral horse expertise. Audits may occur more regularly if deemed required.



## Feral horse rehoming eligibility criteria

A feral horse removed from the park for rehoming must meet minimum criteria prior to loading from the temporary holding yards or other location specified by NPWS. Only in exceptional circumstances would horses not meeting the criteria be transported and rehomed. This would require prior approval of a veterinarian and prior agreement from a rehomer to take that particular horse.

Horses that have the conditions listed below should not be rehomed:

- body condition score of 1 or less out of 5 (Figure 1)
- equine lameness score of 4 or 5 out of 5 (Table 1)
- signs of colic, lethargy, inappetence, profuse diarrhoea, recto-vaginal fistula or significant wounds
- ocular injury associated with pain as evidenced by blepharospasm (holding the eyelid closed or excessive blinking)
- club foot, particularly those that are beyond vertical or affect more than one foot
- enlarged joints or deformed limbs such as from a recent traumatic injury or severe arthritis
- other serious acquired, developmental or congenital abnormalities
- poor health such as emaciation, weakness, difficulty walking or recumbent with difficulty rising
- the horse exhibits extremely dangerous behaviour such as unprovoked charging at personnel
- any other condition as determined by a veterinarian.

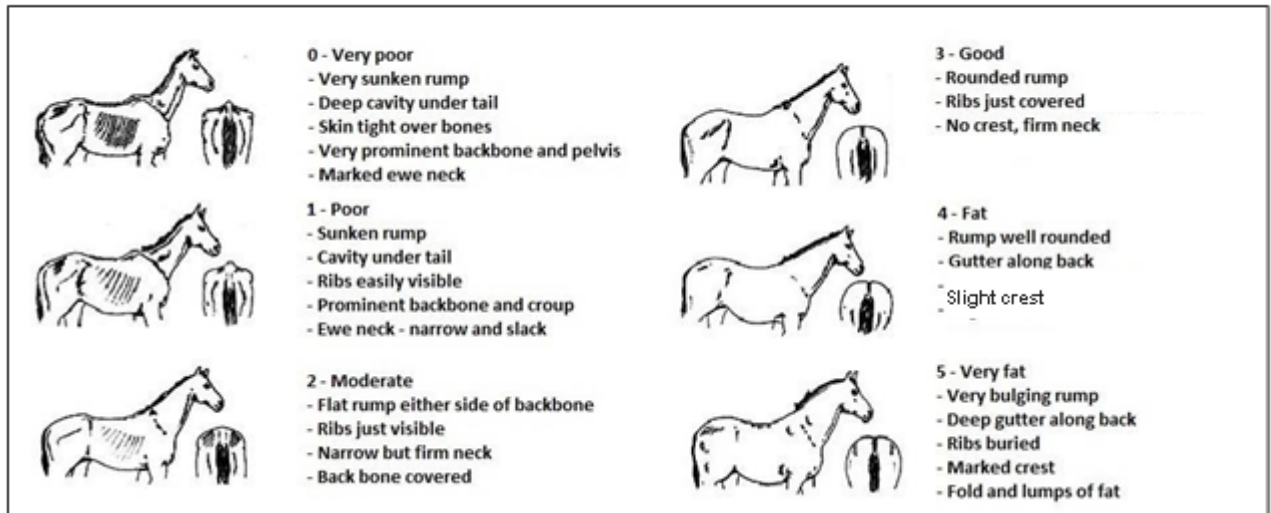


Figure 1 Body condition scoring system based on visual body fat distribution adapted from Carroll and Huntington (1988)

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**Table 1** Equine lameness scoring from Animal Health Australia (2012).

Score	Equine lameness assessment
0	Lameness not perceptible under any circumstances
1	Lameness difficult to observe, not consistently apparent regardless of circumstances (e.g. weight carrying, circling, inclines, hard surface)
2	Lameness difficult to observe at a walk to trot in a straight line (e.g. weight carrying, circling, inclines, hard surface)
3	Lameness consistently observable at a trot under all circumstances
4	Lameness obvious, marked nodding, hitching and/or shortened stride
5	Lameness obvious, minimal weight bearing in motion or rest, inability to move

Source: American Association of Equine Practitioners Scale of Lameness Grading (1984)

### Loading and unloading

- A suitable loading ramp accessible to the truck/trailer being used to transport horses must be available at the NPWS holding and trap yards. The ramp must be suitable for use by horses. The use of a ramp minimises the risk of injury to horses during loading and unloading.
- There must be no holes, gaps or openings, protruding surfaces, or sharp edges present in the loading chute that may allow escape or injury.
- Loading and unloading ramps must have a non-slip surface and be maintained in a safe and proper working condition to prevent slips and falls. Examples of non-slip flooring would include, but not be limited to, rubber mats, sand, shavings, and steel reinforcement rods built into the ramp. There must be no holes in the flooring or items that can cause an animal to trip.
- Placing horse manure at the start of the ramp at yards may encourage horses to use the ramp.
- Trailers and trucks must be properly aligned with the loading and unloading ramp such that no gaps exist between the ramp and floor or sides of the trailer creating a situation where an animal could injure itself.
- All loading and unloading should aim to occur during daylight hours.
- Staff must refuse loading if the trailers, crates or trucks used to transport feral horses for rehoming appear unsafe or are deemed to not meet the Australian or NPWS required standards.

### Temporary holding by NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service or its contractors

- Yard fences must be:
  - at least 1.8 metres high for an animal 2 years of age or older
  - at least 1.5 metres high for a yearling
  - constructed from metal or wood posts and rails.
- Yards must have a well-drained surface.
- Yard fencing must not have any holes, gaps or openings, protruding surfaces or sharp edges present that may cause escape or possible injury.

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- Each average 400 kg horse requires a minimum of 20 litres drinking water per day, but double is required in lactating mares, and when ambient temperature is above 30 degrees Celsius. Water should be provided *ad libitum* (i.e. available as desired). Each yarded horse should be provided with a minimum of 6 kg of good quality hay each day. Requirements will be higher in growing, lactating and undernourished horses who should be provided with hay *ad libitum*.
- Wherever possible, horses should be yarded in their family group. If males are seen fighting, particularly if they are of significantly different age or weight, they should be drafted into separate yards if available.
  - if it is necessary to separate horses out of family groups, horses should be segregated into groups based on sex, age/size or social order
  - separation into the groups in which the horses will travel may also help to familiarise them to each other prior to transport.
- While not ideal, horses may be housed individually if deemed necessary but should still have the ability to see other horses close-by.
- Where practicable horses should not be held in temporary holding for more than 14 days.
- Shade and shelter must be provided.
- During holding, horses must be assessed at least once daily for signs of injury, disease, lack of appetite, willingness to drink, illness or distress. Physiological indicators of disease, illness or distress may include excessive or abnormal absence of sweating, listlessness, excessive rolling, reluctance to move or stand and/or rapid breathing. Evidence of injuries, illnesses or other irregularities must be formally recorded using the *NPWS Daily yarding form* and assessed for treatment or euthanasia if required.
- Depending on the set-up of the temporary holding yards, horses should be walked through the yards to encourage familiarisation before being locked in yards.

## Transport

- Specific requirements for the land transport of horses can be found in *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines: Land Transport of Livestock* (Animal Health Australia 2012).
  - NPWS recognises that the *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines: Land Transport of Livestock* are currently being reviewed. Upon completion of the review, NPWS will update this SOP where necessary.
- The stock trailer or crate must have a sliding rear gate.
- All gates and doors must open and close easily and latch securely.
- Transport duration for most classes of horses without unloading the horses and providing a spell, food and water must be no more than:
  - twelve hours when the ambient temperature along the transport route is 30 degrees Celsius or less (Animal Health Australia 2012)
  - eight hours when the ambient temperature at any time along the transport route is forecast to exceed 30 degrees Celsius (Friend 2001; Weeks et al. 2012; Padalino 2015).
- Maximum transport duration without a spell and providing food and water is shorter for the following classes of horses:
  - noting that it is very challenging to estimate stage of pregnancy in feral mares, mares deemed to be heavily pregnant at the time of rehoming (based on their physical appearance and/or udder size) must not be transported more than 4 hours

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- lactating mares should not be transported more than 8 hours
- mares with dependant (suckling) foals must not be transported more than 5 hours, unless there is sufficient space for the foal to suckle and lie down (Animal Health Australia 2012)
- horses must be provided with food and water immediately prior to and post journeys of 4 hours or more. It is not possible to provide feral horses with water during transport.
- Ideally, heavily pregnant mares and mares with dependant foals should be transported separately from other horses.
- Transport should not occur when adverse weather conditions are forecast. The decision to transport during adverse weather (specifically, conditions that predispose horses to heat or cold stress) will need to consider relevant factors, including (but not limited to) body condition, protection from the elements, transport duration, humidity and ambient temperature along the transport route.

### Transfer documentation

- Prior to loading horses onto an approved truck or trailer for transport to an approved rehomer's property, the following must be completed:
  - the horses must be photographed and/or videoed by NPWS staff as a record of body condition and general fitness for transport
  - NPWS *Transport and Transfer form*
  - NSW Government Transported Stock Statement form.

### Firearms and ammunition

A suitable firearm and approved NPWS firearms user must be onsite when loading, unloading and sorting horses in the event an animal must be euthanised. Refer to feral horse control *SOP NPWS Euthanasia* and *SOP NPWS Ground Shooting* for more detailed information.

## References

Animal Health Australia (2012) *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines: Land transport of livestock*. Animal Health Australia, Canberra, Australia.

Carroll C L and Huntington PJ (1988) Body condition scoring and weight estimation of horses. *Equine Veterinary Journal*. 20, 41–45.

Friend TH (2001) A review of recent research on the transportation of horses. *Journal of Animal Science* 79, E32–E40.

Padalino B (2015) Effects of the different transport phases on equine health status, behaviour, and welfare: A review. *Journal of Veterinary Behaviour*. 10, 272–282.

Weeks C A, McGreevy P and Waran N K (2012) Welfare issues related to transport and handling of both trained and unhandled horses and ponies. *Equine Veterinary Education*. 24, 423–430.



## Related documents

NPWS feral horse control standard operating procedures:

- NPWS Ground shooting
- NPWS Passive trapping
- NPWS Removal for knackery or abattoir
- NPWS Mustering (in preparation as of October 2024)
- NPWS Euthanasia
- NPWS Aerial shooting

Animal Health Australia 2012. Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines: Land transport of livestock. Canberra. [animalwelfarestandards.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Land-transport-of-livestock-Standards-and-Guidelines-Version-1.-1-21-September-2012.pdf](http://animalwelfarestandards.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Land-transport-of-livestock-Standards-and-Guidelines-Version-1.-1-21-September-2012.pdf)

NPWS Statement of program intent

NPWS Transport and transfer form

NPWS Domestication (rehoming) guidelines

NPWS Application to be registered as a rehomer

NPWS Daily yarding record

NPWS Rehoming request form

NPWS Rehoming registration application: assessment checklist

NPWS Annual program return form

NSW Government Transported Stock Statement form

NPWS Firearms Management Manual

# Appendix 1: Rehoming process summary

## Appendix 1: Rehoming process summary

Stage 1: Rehoming applications	
Step 1: Potential rehomers read the Rehoming Guidelines and submit an 'Application be registered as a rehomer'	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Applications are assessed by a member of the feral horse team, using the application Checklist. Further details/information may be requested.</li> <li>2. Once assessed, the application is approved (or not) by a more senior member of the feral horse team.</li> <li>3. Applicants are notified in writing of the assessment outcome, and the information is recorded and stored.</li> <li>4. Approved rehomers details are added to the website (with consent).</li> </ol>
Stage 2: Requests and transport of feral horses	
Step 2: Requests for feral horses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Once approved, rehomers can request horses using the 'Feral horse request form'.</li> <li>2. Requests are recorded, and information forwarded to the trapping team.</li> </ol>
Step 3: Trapping and selection of horses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Passive trapping is undertaken, in line with Passive Trapping SOP. <b>Horses are the responsibility of NPWS while on Park or within holding yards.</b></li> <li>2. Information of horses trapped and removed (or released) is recorded.</li> <li>3. NPWS staff and trapping team work together to identify trapped horses to meet rehomer requests.</li> </ol>
Step 4: Confirmation of horse availability	When requested horses are identified, NPWS staff will confirm with rehomers: agreement to take selected horses, and confirmation of pick-up time and date.
Step 5: Loading and transport of horses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Horses are loaded on to transport by trapping team. Transporter signs the Transport and Transfer form and Travelling Stock Statement Form.</li> <li>2. Horses are transported <i>directly</i> to the approved rehomers property. <b>Once loaded, the horses become the responsibility the rehomers.</b></li> </ol>
Step 6: Record keeping	Details of rehomed horses, are recorded in the rehomers file.
Stage 3: Feral horses rehomed	
Step 7: Horses received by rehomers. *All subsequent requests for horses: within 12 months go to Step 2; after 12 months go to Step 1.	Rehomers receive the horses at the approved property or is notified by the transporter of receipt / unloading.
At all stages	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Euthanasia of horses can occur at any time → Refer to NPWS SOP Euthanasia</li> <li>• Prioritise staff / visitor safety and animal welfare Ensure all work is carried out in accordance with relevant NPWS SOP: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Removal for Domestication (rehoming)</li> <li>– Passive Trapping</li> <li>– Euthanasia</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Exercise discretion and escalate higher risk decisions</li> <li>• Adhere to the required time periods (holding times, transport times)</li> <li>• Ensure standard forms are used and signed (where required)</li> <li>• Document all decision-making and keep clear records, including photographs where possible.</li> <li>• <b>Rehomers annual program return.</b> Due 30 September for horses received the previous financial year.</li> </ul>	