UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

★ news release

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT Pearl - 343-3609

For Release to PM's, APRIL 2, 1965

SNOW-DRIVEN ANTELOPE GIVEN NEW HOMES ON THE RANGE

More than 400 graceful pronghorn antelope have survived the hard Northwest winter, thanks to Federal-State cooperation, the Department of the Interior said today.

A few weeks ago, herds of the lithe little animals were plodding through hip-deep Montana snows, scouring farmlands for food, nuzzling and pawing ice-encrusted fields for scraps of sustenance. Some died. The others neared starvation.

Today, the survivors are flourishing in a kinder habitat. Their new homes on the range are on public domain lands farther south.

The antelope were driven south from Canada by one of the bitterest winters on record. Death awaited them in the areas near Chinook and Malta, Montana, where hunger halted their migration. There they gathered last January to fight a losing battle for survival; and there they were discovered by agents of the Montana Fish and Game Commission.

The Commission decided to transplant them, and the most likely spot was public rangeland south of Malta, where the snow depth was less and the natural vegetation more ample. A quick agreement was reached with the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, and the roundups began.

Using planes, helicopters and horses, BLM and State hands teamed up to drive the animals into trap nets. Then they loaded them into trucks. About 125 antelope were taken into Utah, to help establish new herds on open Federal and State range. The majority were set free in eastern Montana grasslands to add their dash and color to the range.

Antelope were once nearly as numerous as bison on this continent; but by the turn of the century their numbers were very low. The herds are now replenished, and the species out of danger, but the memory of decline still moves resource managers to emergency acts of mercy.

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P.N. 61223-65