

Volunteers free horses trapped by snow on B.C. mountain

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The saga of two starving horses who inspired an entire community was drawing to a successful close after volunteers finally got the animals out of their snow-bound prison late Tuesday night.

"They came out of their kilometre-long trench and they're either sitting in the bush overnight or they're trying to bring them out a little ways and then they'll park them for the night," explained Lana Jeck, matriarch of the family that found the animals on the side of Mount Renshaw a week ago.

Every day since then, a growing number of locals have been trudging up the mountain with shovels in hand to dig out a pathway of escape through two-metre-deep snow for the horses, who are believed to have been abandoned by an Alberta hunter.

"If things go according to plan, they should be out [Wednesday]," said Lana. "It will have been a week of lots of people and their good hearts and strong backs, moving snow."

Horses found during hunt for snowmobiles

It all started when Logan Jeck, 21, and a friend stumbled across the horses while out looking for some snowmobiles that some tourists had to leave behind when they got stuck during a trip to the backcountry.

At first, the young men thought the most humane thing to do would be to take their guns and shoot the emaciated horses to put them out of their misery.

But Lana and her husband, Dave, insisted their daughter Toni, 22, go along to check out the animals as she had some equine expertise.

"My daughter looked in their eyes, and she said they were thin but they had life and energy," said Lana. "They must be fighters, for what they've persevered."

Dave headed up with a shovel the next day, made a shelter, took off the horses' shoes and melted snow for water.

Volunteer spirit prevailed

As word of their plight spread, all sorts of people started showing up to help. Soon the horses were being taken hay for feed and blankets for warmth.

"There's a little three-year-old mare, and she's full of piss and vinegar, and there's a 10-to-15-year-old gelding, and he's a nice, big strong horse," said Lana, who describes her family as "country people."

"They're like all our pets — they only want to be fed and loved and they won't tell us a damned thing."

Last Friday, the B.C. SPCA sent up a couple of officers along with a veterinarian to consider whether the animals could be lifted out by helicopter.

"A number of factors were taken into consideration," said chief animal protection officer Shawn Eccles.

"Certainly, cost was one of them. But at the end of the day, the veterinarian examined the animals and determined that their conditions were such that they probably wouldn't survive or it wasn't wise to use a helicopter."

The horses were badly underweight, had frostbite and were missing quite a bit of hair as the result of rain scald. Eccles said on a scale of one to nine, the horses' health rated about a two.

But Lana Jeck said no one gave a thought to giving up on them.

"They have blankets on and they're eating and drinking and doing Mother Nature's stuff," she said. "They whinny and they've got spirit in their eyes."

Hunter under investigation

The SPCA has confirmed they are investigating a particular individual.

"Once our investigation is completed, if the elements of an offence have been met, which by all accounts at this point looks like it has been, charges would be forwarded to Crown," said Eccles.

Though Lana said the hope is for a happy ending on Wednesday, the adventure wasn't over yet.

She noted there was still a 26-kilometre walk to get the horses out to where they can be picked up by officials.

But if things go off without a hitch, there will doubtless be quite a celebration.

"It's a little community. When there's a hand needed, you can always find something to lend a helping hand," said Lana.

"It's got nothing to do with Christmas spirit. These people have good hearts 12 months out of the year."

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