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## Hay dropped to starving horses at Montana ranch

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(01-28) 16:31 PST Billings, Mont. (AP) --

A helicopter airlifted 20 tons of hay, and deputies hauled even more to a sprawling southeastern Montana ranch where hundreds of horses are starving.



The horses belong to James H. Leachman, who pleaded not guilty Friday to 10 misdemeanor counts of animal cruelty in an initial court appearance in Billings. Leachman was supposed to remove the animals last July when his business, Leachman Cattle Co., lost the ranch at a federal foreclosure sale.

Leachman said little during the hearing. But in an interview with The Associated Press, he blamed the horses' problems on the family that bought his ranch. He said the horses had survived Montana's harsh winters for years on natural forage, but this year were confined by the new landowners to areas that already were overgrazed.

"There's only been one side told," Leachman said. "They put them in a pasture that had no grass."

Justice Court Judge Larry Herman told Leachman not to enter the property to provide care for the horses without first making arrangements with authorities. Each animal cruelty count is punishable by up to one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

Leachman, 68, ran a horse breeding business called Hairpin Cavvy.

Five of his horses have died in recent weeks, and a Montana veterinarian warned that others would start dying if they did not receive food.

The Billings Gazette reports that small bands of horses started eating the hay when the bales broke up on impact during Thursday's airlift. The hay was expected to last a few days, until colder weather hardened roads enough to drive more to the animals.

Yellowstone County Sheriff's Office officials hauled more hay with a tractor and a flatbed to about 75 horses stuck in an isolated pasture.

Sheriff Mike Linder, who drove a loaned tractor to deliver hay to the animals, said the volunteer response had been great.

"I spent three hours on the phone, and, in three hours, the hitch was being built, I had the tractor and the helicopter lined up," he said.

Al Blain, who owns Billings Flying Service with his brother, said an estimated 300 to 400 horses gathered in the drop area.

The Northern International Livestock Exposition had collected \$10,000 in cash donations and about 250 tons of hay by Thursday.

Turk Stovall, whose family now owns the ranch, said Leachman's horses have been grazing there for six months.

Stovall said he couldn't continue to let the horses graze with his cows calving and the need for the spring grass.

"These horses would never have had a chance if we hadn't said we need some help out here," Stovall said.

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