

Valles Caldera National Preserve

Listening Session #5

Ghost Ranch, Dining Room

March 10, 2001 1:00 - 4:00 pm

Summary of Discussion

Facilitator/Recorder: Lucy Moore

Welcome and Introductions: Bill deBuys, acting chair and member of the board of the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP), welcomed the group to the listening session and expressed appreciation on behalf of the board to all those who took time to come and offer their thoughts on the future of the VCNP. Bill asked the other Board members present to introduce themselves. Present, in addition to deBuys, were: Bob Armstrong, Karen Durkovich, Palemon Martinez, Stephen D. Stoddard, Thomas W. Swetnam, Dennis Vasquez, and David Yepa. Background: Bill introduced a brief video which gave background on the creation of the VCNP, and set the stage for discussion about its future.

DISCUSSION: Following the video, Lucy Moore welcomed the group, offered groundrules for the discussion, and explained her role as facilitator and recorder. A summary of the discussion would be sent to everyone who signed in, she explained, in order to keep in touch with residents of the Valley. The Board would want to continue the dialogue with those who attend the Listening Sessions, as their thinking evolves.

In general, the comments during the evening fell into three categories: visions for the future use of the VCNP, potential impacts and benefits to the community, and suggestions for management and decision-making processes. The comments summarized below do not represent any consensus among participants at the Listening Session.

VISIONS FOR THE VCNP: There was much discussion about the future use of the Valles Caldera, focusing on the following themes:

New kind of relationship: Many felt that the federal management policies on public land have been "economically stifling" to northern New Mexicans. There is hope for a new, more beneficial working relationship between the local communities and the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP) Board, if the Board will understand the special culture and history of northern New Mexico. The Valles Caldera is important to local residents, both spiritually and economically, and they look forward to partnering with the Board to make wise decisions about its use. Those with grazing allotments in the National Forest "across the fence" from the VCNP also hope for a good relationship with their new neighbor, and urged the Board to establish a formal communications mechanism with those allottees.

Ranching: Many participants during the meeting spoke of their desire to have the VCNP be a working ranch that people can use, as Senator Domenici says in the video, and as Congress

intended. They reminded the Board of the history of the property, including its status as a land grant prior to its falling into private hands. "We are conservationists, and historically we managed that land," said one local resident. Those from the Youngsville, Coyote, and Canones Grazing Associations, and the Northern New Mexico Stockmen's Association, would like to be able to use the area again, as soon as possible, for grazing, "to take the pressure off other grazing lands."

Some supported the concept of using part of the VCNP as a grass bank, in order to rest allotments and other grazing areas. One speaker objected to what he fears is a forced participation in the grass bank, and spoke in favor of rangeland. There was also some interest in new grazing permits in the VCNP, perhaps negotiated by an association of ranchers and the Board. A local resident pointed out that the greatest need for local ranchers is winter grazing. Another asked that efforts be made to reclaim lost grass lands, since the area is losing 1% of its grass land each year.

A board member asked the group about the feasibility of yearling operations rather than cow-calf. There was general feeling that cow-calf was preferable, for historical and traditional reasons, and because importing yearlings was risky in terms of disease and potential loss.

A participant noted that there are a variety of grazing needs - yearling and cow-calf, new permits, grass banks, and rangeland - and that "we all have a piece of the answer." The board and surrounding communities will need to be open-minded, he said, work together. He urged the Board to come to the communities frequently for more discussion. Another suggested that the VCNP could become a model of good grazing practices.

It will be crucial for the Board to determine the carrying capacity of the land (for both cattle and wildlife) before making any grazing decisions.

Hunting: Many present urged the Board to manage and harvest wildlife, particularly elk, for the health of the herd, and to minimize impacts to the VCNP and neighbors. A participant asked the Board "to learn from the burro experience, and not let the situation get to a point where you have to shoot them from helicopters." Another suggested that the Board consult with Merle Elote at the Jicarilla Tribe for ideas about elk hunting, for profit and health of the herd.

Logging: Local residents spoke of "slowly being squeezed out of the forests." Small logging and thinning operations, using traditional methods, would be appropriate and beneficial for the VCNP. One participant warned about the density of Ponderosas on the southern slopes of the north end of the ranch, above Valle San Antonio. Another said that there is not much big timber left, and suggested that the VCNP "clean up around it, and leave it there for everyone to see."

Multiple Uses: Some spoke in favor of multiple uses on the land, believing that it is big enough to satisfy a variety of different users. Another local resident warned that the acreage is limited, and that there inevitably will be some competition among uses. "We need to enter this with the mindset of looking out for the other guy, not just ourselves." The group appreciated the challenge to the Board to balance all the uses in a fair way.

Camping: A local resident asked for some campsites where there is no grazing. It was also suggested that the VCNP provide a few permanent structures, or "cabins here and there," for recreationists caught in bad weather.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE COMMUNITIES:

Elk Overpopulation: Many spoke of their concern for the Valles Caldera, and their own property and neighborhoods, if the elk are allowed to continue to overpopulate. It was a bad idea to introduce them to northern New Mexico in 1947, and now we are paying the price. Mule deer are gone, grazing land impacted, river banks destroyed, and laundry eaten off clothes lines in Pajarito Acres. Elk eat as they migrate, and often reach the grass in the spring before the cattle do. Someone observed that "there are no elk in the Baca now - they're all in my yard." The Chicoma Livestock Association which borders Santa Clara Pueblo is already seeing impacts from the elk numbers. A Regina resident added that orchards are being damaged. There are also fears of elk-borne diseases, like Brucellosis and Trichomoniasis.

A local resident asked that wolves not be introduced into the area as a check on the elk population. Although hunting was generally accepted as a necessary control, it was noted that hunting should be done in ways that don't simply drive the elk into other areas.

There was discussion about the numbers of elk, and an elk study report from Bandelier in 1997 was cited. The group agreed that coming to agreement on elk numbers is difficult.

Visitor Centers: Some were worried that visitor centers would bring too many people to the area.

MANAGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING: There was interest in the future management of the property and the role of the Board and local communities in making management decisions.

Opportunity for Creative Management: The Board was encouraged to consider creative management options, which incorporate the history and tradition of the region, and the needs of local communities. Another suggested managing the VCNP by watershed. In general, "bureaucrats are not good managers," and in the past public land management has been "a bunch of red tape," in the eyes of many locals. "We will be in a fishbowl - let's think of new ways to reach a high standard of management."

Need for Enforcement: A participant warned against the "Caja del Rio disaster," where people have seriously abused public lands and where there seems to be no enforcement to protect the area.

Value of Local Expertise and Labor: During the meeting, several participants offered to help the Board in a variety of ways. The workforce available to work on the property is plentiful - "every northern New Mexican has a chainsaw and a pickup." It was also suggested that high school kids could be employed during summers on the VCNP.

Include the Youth: It was pointed out that the young people today will inherit the resources of the area, including the VCNP. They need education about the value and care of the resources, and they need to become knowledgeable about the best policies for managing the resources.

Communication: The Board was asked to establish a formal relationship with "cross-fence" neighbors, particularly those with grazing allotments. "We need more than this meeting," said one, who suggested ongoing meetings and regular communication. Several also asked for more comprehensive notification of local community members when meetings like this are scheduled, and suggested using KDCE radio in Espanola, letters to all Forest Service permittees, and organizations' phone trees. The message was loud and clear that local communities want to remain involved as the planning process continues.

Accessibility: A local resident asked the Board to use historic access routes to the VCNP, and to consider carefully creating any new access points. "Be conservative," warned a participant, "because it will be impossible to take away access once it is offered." Too many access avenues disperse wildlife and make hunting more difficult.

Fee Structures: Fearing the setting of a precedent, a participant asked that no additional fees for hunting or grazing be assessed for those activities in the VCNP.

Inventory and Monitoring: The Board was urged to establish a carrying capacity figure for both livestock and wildlife on the VCNP, in order to make wise decisions about grazing and hunting uses.

Fire Control: A participant suggested the Board work with Southwest Strategies, a coalition of federal agencies in the southwest, on fire suppression issues.

Summary written by Lucy Moore. Please contact her with any comments or corrections. 505-820-2166, fax 505-820-2191, or email <lucymoore@nets.com>

Potential partners and sources of help:

The following groups offered to partner with the VCNP in a variety of ways

Gateway Coalition:

Los Alamos Chamber of Commerce
Los Alamos County Council
Bandelier National Monument
Friends of Bandelier
Los Alamos National Lab
University of California
University of New Mexico at Los Alamos
UNM Small Business Development Center
Lodgers Tax Board
Los Alamos Public Schools
Los Alamos Historical Society
Pajarito Environmental Education Center
Multi-agency Volunteer Task Force - John Hogan 662-5052, or Craig Martin 672-1962
Los Alamos Vision 20/20
Los Alamos Ski Patrol Search and Rescue
Wildlife Center - POBox 246, Espanola, NM, Dr. K. Ramsey, 753-9505
Back Country Horsemen - Chris Atkinson 689-2402
Los Alamos Nordic Club
Velo del Norte Cycling
Valles Caldera Rim Trail - 662-2662
Trout Unlimited, Truchas Chapter
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
New Mexican Stockmen's Association
Northern New Mexican Stockmen's Association - M.R.Pacheco 758-3168
Chicama Livestock Association - 753-1783

Ghost Ranch
Quivira Coalition
Museum of Natural History in Albuquerque
Los Alamos Pathways Association
Southwest 4WD Association
New Mexico Trout (Albuquerque)
National Park Service, National Natural Landmarks Program
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

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