

Valles Caldera Trust
Minutes of the Public Meeting – September 6, 2005
Country Inn & Suites
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Board Members Present

Tracy Hephner, Chairperson
Barbara Johnson, Vice-Chairperson
Larry Icerman, Secretary
John Caid, Member
Jim Gosz, Member
Darlene Koontz, Member
Raymond Loretto, Member
Gilbert Zepeda, Member

Staff Present

Cliff Dils, Acting Executive Director
Rob Dixon, Information Technology Manager
Dennis Hazlett, Chief Administrative Officer
Randy McKee, Ranch Foreman
Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist
Dennis Trujillo, Preserve Manager

I. Welcome

Tracy Hephner, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 7:15 p.m. Ms. Hephner introduced the Board members and welcomed the members of the public in attendance.

II. Review and Approve the Agenda and the Minutes of the April 14, 2005, Meeting

A motion was made to approve the agenda. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously. A motion was made to approve the minutes of the April 14, 2005, meeting, which was seconded and passed unanimously.

III. Preserve Manager's Report

Dennis Trujillo, Preserve Manager, reported that the staff has been preparing for the Valle Toledo prescribed fire that is intended to gain information about the effectiveness of using fire to manage grasslands. An Environmental Assessment (EA) is complete and has been available on the Trust's Web site since August 19. Comments will be taken until September 19. After reviewing comments, the Trust plans to move forward on the burn when conditions are right, with target dates of September 27 to 28, plus a one-half day before for preparation and an unspecified time afterward for cleanup.

Barbara Johnson asked if there were any other target dates. Mr. Trujillo responded that because of the time and resources required to set up a prescribed burn, along with the cooperation of such

neighboring entities as the Forest Service, Santa Clara Pueblo, Bandelier National Monument, and Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge, if the burn was not conducted in September it probably would not be implemented until next fall.

Mr. Trujillo also discussed a vegetation study administered by staff member, Karen Lee. The contractor, Photo Science, has delineated about 15,000 stands of a minimum five acres and described structure, cover, and species diversity.

The Preserve is winding up the 2005 livestock program, and livestock producers have been told to exit during the last week of September. New Mexico State University (NMSU) Professors Manny Encinias and Andres Cibiles have been conducting a research project and sharing information about animal behavior, movement, and diet. They also provided three NMSU students to help with data collection and herd count.

The Walatowa Woodlands Thinning Project was completed this summer. T.C. Co. of Hernandez, New Mexico, did the final treatment, which took up where similar work by the Jemez Pueblo ended. Both projects achieved good results.

North of Highway 4, the Trust has been working with The Nature Conservancy on a thinning project, which has been completed. Work should start in the next few weeks on trails and an interpretive site at Banco Bonito, where visitors can learn about forest restoration.

In the matter of noxious weeds, areas identified and treated last year have been revisited by the BLM for retreatment, if necessary. The project has resulted in control of 90 to 98% of populations. There is one more year on this project.

About 5.9 miles of the 10.2-mile VC02 road have been upgraded. It was a major undertaking because the road needed a lot of drainage, which involved hauling in 5,120 cubic feet of material and installing 52 culverts. Along the road, wetlands were restored, and work has been done with Bill Zeedyk to incorporate his permeable fill design along the entire road. The remaining 4.3 miles should be completed in 2006, which will entail two realignments. About 140 miles or roads on the Preserve have been described by global positioning measurements, and the information is being entered into a database.

On August 9, the Trust received a Surface Use Operating Plan from Geo Products of New Mexico Inc., which intends to drill two new geothermal wells. Mr. Trujillo is working with the Southwest Regional Office of the Forest Service to review the plan.

The recreation staff has produced a schedule of winter activities for the 2005-2006 season and for the summer of 2006. December 16 is projected as the start of winter skiing. The Trust is working with Ski New Mexico to enhance the program, and Mr. Trujillo proposed joining the organization. Mr. Trujillo also proposed keeping two trails open for winter access. The Preserve is at capacity in terms of logistics and vehicles but can handle more special events. The Trust staff is now working on how to structure the 2006 elk hunt.

For 2005 activities, the Trust sold 6,309 tickets, for a revenue total of \$31,545, up from about \$21,000 in 2004. Access fees have totaled \$42,830. Income from the 2005 fishing program was \$74,375.

Chairperson Hephner observed that the Trust's recreation staff has been phenomenal all summer.

Oscar Simpson, New Mexico Wildlife Federation, asked how his organization could provide input on the recreation plan. Ms. Hephner responded that the plan presently is a briefing paper in draft form for the Board.

IV. Operating Budgets for FY 2006

Larry Icerman moved that the Board approve an operating budget of \$3.65 million for Fiscal Year 2006, subject to revision when Congress determines the actual appropriation level. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously, subsequent to the following the discussion.

Jim Gosz observed that the projected appropriation level is the same amount as last year.

David Henderson, Valles Caldera Coalition, asked why, with all the needs on the Preserve, the Trust was asking for a flat budget. Dennis Hazlett explained how the budget has been handled in the past four years. Each year, Senator Pete Domenici's office asks the Trust what actual needs are, and the Trust has asked for \$3.65 million. However, the \$3.65 million is not the total amount of funding the Trust will receive. This year, Senator Domenici's office also asked what the Trust would do with additional funding, and the Trust identified infrastructure needs and capital improvements that would support the generation of income in the future. That amount is \$1.5 million.

Oscar Simpson said if his group had advance notice, they could support the Trust's funding requests with letters.

A member of the audience asked if individual line items were the same as last year. Larry Icerman responded that in the broad sense, they were roughly the same, but a line-by-line comparison would show some differences. Another attendee asked about payment to Trustees for services. Chairperson Hephner responded that the Preserve's veterinarian, the only veterinarian available in the area, is also a Board member.

David Henderson said he understood that the Trust had limited the scope of operations because it lacked the resources to do more. Barbara Johnson responded that the Trust had to become financially self-sufficient in 10 more years. Mr. Henderson suggested the Trust should front load capital-intensive projects in order to reach self-sufficiency.

Larry Icerman explained that the operating budget was not the same as a Congressional budget request. The operating budget was tied to the Congressional appropriation, which is already determined, subject to minor adjustments. The next opportunity to ask for more funding is Fiscal Year 2007.

Larry Icerman made a motion to approve the budget covering the transportation funds of \$1.475 million for Fiscal Year 2006, subject to revision according to Congressional appropriation changes, and to obligate the final budgeted funds. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously, subsequent to the following the discussion.

These funds must be used for publicly accessible highways. The Trust has primarily earmarked these funds for right-of-way improvements along Highway 4, including elk-viewing areas. Construction will begin next year on these improvements. The Trust hopes to get Preserve roads declared public highways for the purpose of using transportation funding.

V. Forage Utilization Plan

Dennis Trujillo said that Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist, and others have been collecting data for several years, but the forage utilization plan has suffered a setback recently with the loss of key staff members. The Trust has had help from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) with data on forest conditions, water, fences, and the condition of improvements. With more data, the Trust's staff can move forward with a comprehensive plan.

Currently, the grazing program is set up as an interim program that operates under an EA that expires in December 2005. The Trust intends to continue the program another year, based on updating with monitoring data collected to date. The Trust has operated a Heifer Replacement Program and a Cow-Calf Conservation Stewardship Program. The Trust intends to seek comments on these programs from the public. Letters will go out in the next two to three weeks, and a decision will follow in December 2005.

VI. Preserve Scientist's Report

Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist, said the data requirements for forage utilization planning will be undertaken during the next year. The data will cover all herbivores, including 3,000 elk and up to 2,000 cattle, as well as an unknown number of rodents and insects. The first step will involve taking a current pasture map and evaluating the quality and quantity of forage in existing areas and in new areas.

Mr. Parmenter plans to integrate the soils map, which is now under construction, with slope and topographical maps. Fences built decades ago define a number of pastures. One question is whether the fences are in the right places. Another is whether the fencing structure adequately protects riparian areas. Exclosure studies are being used to determine the impacts of elk and cattle. Professor Encinias is using radio collars to determine the movement patterns of cattle. One option to limit the areas subject to grazing is the use of virtual fences and wireless technology.

Adam Rankin, Albuquerque Journal, asked how much of the Preserve is open to grazing, Dennis Trujillo responded that less than one-half of the Preserve was currently available for livestock grazing.

David Henderson said that he considers elk hunting and harvesting one of the gold rings for the Trust, that is, a resource that could make the Trust financially self-sustaining. Mr. Henderson did not think cattle would make the Trust self-sustaining. Mr. Parmenter noted that the Trust was moving ahead rapidly with a multi-agency, regional, elk-management plan.

Billy Stern, Forest Guardians, said he was disappointed there were no figures that indicated forage utilization on the ground. Barbara Johnson responded that collected data would be available on the NMSU Jornada Experimental Range Web site.

Chairperson Hephner pointed out that the Board had named a grazing subcommittee whose members were Barbara Johnson, Jim Gosz, and herself. The subcommittee has visited with many people who have vast experience in managing forage. The Board wants to make sure that a broad scope of options is considered.

David Ortiz, a participant in the Cow-Calf Conservation Stewardship Program and the Heifer Replacement Program, congratulated the Trust's staff for a good seminar. Participants got a tour during which a grazing expert explained the different grass types. Mr. Ortiz said he observed that many pastures are underutilized and that elk tend to follow the cattle. The cattle eat the rough grass and the tall grass, and the elk follow and eat the lush, tender grasses. Mr. Ortiz thanked the Board and staff for the work done so far.

Chairperson Hephner said the Trust has monitored cattle very carefully and has detailed records. Managers have changed the rotation system to graze pastures at different times of the year.

Billy Stern asked about bacteria in the water. Bob Parmenter responded that bacteria are certainly present. Water samples have been taken from the San Antonio Hot Springs and are in the process of being analyzed.

Oscar Simpson commended Bob Parmenter for his work but said he would like to see more actual data available to the public.

David Henderson suggested that the Board make an interim decision on the grazing plan to let science catch up with decision-making.

Turning to the proposed Toledo burn, Bob Parmenter pointed out a pending a research proposal with the Rocky Mountain Research Station to better understand the impact of fire. Most commercial grasslands are fire-maintained. Mr. Parmenter would like to test some hypotheses to gain an understanding of the importance of fire in an ecosystem and its impact on forage, nutrient content, insects, water quality, and fish.

VII. Web Site Update

Rob Dixon, Information Technology Manager, reported that the Trust's new Web site, vallescaldera.gov, was launched January 28, 2005, and contains 1,200 files and 114 folders. The content so far primarily addresses recreational activities. Between launch date and the end of

August, the site had more than 140,000 visits and received more than 6,000 orders valued at more than \$400,000.

VIII. Election of Officers

Chairperson Hephner reported that the Board had amended the Bylaws previously to change the date of elections to coordinate the terms of office with the federal fiscal year beginning October 1.

Larry Icerman made a motion to ratify the election of the officers of the Board: Tracy Hephner, Chairperson; Barbara Johnson, Vice-Chairperson; and Larry Icerman, Secretary. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously.

IX. Transition Plans

Chairperson Hephner announced that the Board had selected Cliff Dils to serve as Acting Executive Director, while the Board conducts a national search for a new executive director. Mr. Dils is currently Deputy Forest Supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest. Ms. Hephner added that during the transition, the Board would take on external relations with the community and the media. Barbara Johnson will lead the effort to find a new executive director.

Barbara Johnson said announcements would be placed in appropriate venues. The Board would like to receive resumes by October 31. Attendee Carl Johnson suggested that the Board allow more time for applications.

A member of the audience asked why Ray Powell had stepped down and said the resignation could reflect poorly on the Trust. Chairperson Hephner explained that this Board is different than a traditional board. The President appoints members for their expertise and not to represent a specific constituency. This Board's responsibility is to set policy, which can occasionally create tension between the Board and the Trust's staff. Jim Gosz noted that the key word is "implement." The executive director's role is to implement the policies established by the Board.

David Henderson questioned Ms. Hephner's comment about not representing a constituency. Mr. Henderson said he thought the Board was "constricting" into a single point of view and that the Preserve is a unique property that should be managed in a unique way.

Roger Tilkemeier, a rancher and businessman, said the legislation creating the Preserve specifies that Board members have special expertise but does not say they are appointed to represent anyone. The members are responsible to the President and Congress. Mr. Tilkemeier disagreed strongly with Mr. Henderson's statement that individual Board members should represent particular constituencies.

David Henderson again questioned whether there were diverse points of view. Chairperson Hephner said the Board members are actively engaged in discussion. The members do not always agree, but they are all dedicated to the goals established by Congress for the Preserve.

David Ortiz, who has been involved with the Preserve for three years, said that in his opinion the Board has conducted itself in a professional manner. From his own previous experience on other boards, he believes the Board has conducted itself properly.

X. Public Comments

Betsy Barnett, Sierra Club, noted that Congress instructed the Board to pursue six goals and not just focus on one. The Sierra Club is opposed to limiting planning to only the livestock program. Ms. Barnett said the Sierra Club is concerned about the impact of the Board's decisions on recreation.

Billy Stern, Forest Guardians, said he thought the Trust was putting cattle before other programs. Mr. Stern said the legislation called for sustained yield on the Preserve and urged the Board to develop a comprehensive plan before deciding the level of livestock grazing. The grazing program, he said, costs more than its revenue. According to Mr. Stern, the Board should weigh income from fishing, hunting, and tourism, as well as completing a comprehensive, detailed management plan for the Preserve.

Roger Tilkemeier strongly suggested that meeting participants read the legislation thoroughly. He said Mr. Stern had chosen sections of the law he considered important selectively. The law clearly specifies that the Preserve shall be managed and operated as a working ranch. That means the Trust must operate a livestock operation with the specific goal of developing and maintaining a profitable operation. The reason the Trust is not generating a profit is because of restrictions in numbers to the point that the grazing program cannot possibly be successful financially, even though there is excessive grass on the Preserve. The Preserve had previously been a well-managed ranch for about 150 years prior to the purchase by the federal government. The ranch is historically and culturally a part of that community. Mr. Tilkemeier did agree with Mr. Stern that the Preserve needs a management plan.

Bill Huey, Valles Caldera Coalition, said he did not think there is any benefit to continuing this controversy. Mr. Huey advised the Board to decide the right way to go and go that way.

XI. Adjournment

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded and passed unanimously.

Chairperson Hephner adjourned the meeting at 8:55 p.m.

Approved on November 17, 2005.

Respectfully submitted by Larry Icerman, Secretary.