

Valles Caldera Trust
Minutes of the Public Meeting – November 17, 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

Raymond Loretto, Member

Gilbert Zepeda, Member

Staff Present

Cliff Dils, Acting Executive Director

Rourke McDermott, Landscape Architect

Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist

Marie Rodriguez, Natural Resources Coordinator

Ana Steffen, Acting Cultural Resources Coordinator

I. Welcome

Chairperson Tracy Hephner opened the meeting at 6:05 p.m. and welcomed guests. She said the General Accountability Office (GAO) report, just released the previous day, would not be discussed because some Trustees had not yet had an opportunity to review the report. She also announced the first issue of the Trustees' newsletter, La Ventana en los Valles, written and produced largely by Barbara Johnson. Ms. Hephner said the Trust would no longer use a court reporter for the taking of the meeting minutes. Any member of the public who wants statements read into the record should provide a copy of their statement to the meeting's recorder.

II. Review and Approve the Agenda

Larry Icerman moved that the agenda be approved, and Ray Loretto seconded the motion, which was approved unanimously.

III. Review and Approve Meeting Minutes

Larry Icerman moved that minutes for the May 25, 2005, August 12, 2005, and September 6, 2005, meetings be approved, and Barbara Johnson seconded the motion, which was approved unanimously.

IV. Executive Director's Report

Cliff Dils, Acting Executive Director, and Marie Rodriguez, Natural Resources Coordinator, reported on the Toledo Burn, the first prescribed burn on the Preserve since federal acquisition.

The burn took eight hours over two days and employed both hand-carried drip torches and aerial ignition. The project went well. The Trust will use the information gained to understand the effects and effectiveness of the controlled burn as a management tool. Trust staff had valuable support from the Santa Fe National Forest, Bandelier National Monument, Santa Clara Pueblo, Sandoval County, and the U.S. Forest Service, Region 3 through the provision of equipment and/or personnel. The project was funded by a grant from the Rocky Mountain Research Station.

Mr. Dils reported that on October 28, 2005, he sent a letter to GeoProducts of New Mexico in response to the company's request to drill two new exploratory geothermal wells on the Preserve. The letter stated that certain information was still needed and that the lease, which expired in February, be made current. There is no deadline by which GeoProducts must respond, but typically applicants respond within 30 days.

V. Report on Fall 2005 Standing Biomass

Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist, explained that grazing and forest utilization studies have a number of components. Data are now posted on the Jornada Experimental Range Web site, and he plans to complete the analysis by the end of December. Preliminary results indicate that biomass utilization was lower this year than in the past two years, which correlates somewhat with having fewer cattle, although the impact of elk has not been incorporated.

New Mexico State University Professor Manny Encinias has completed his studies of animal behavior, movement, and diet. Both elk and cattle are eating bluegrass but may not be eating bunchgrass.

The standing biomass study involves identifying which species of forage are actually being consumed. Dr. Parmenter and his team will use satellite imagery to estimate total biomass. Modeling by Los Alamos National Laboratory will be finished mid-December.

VI. Report on 2006 Grazing Program

Chairperson Hephner reported that livestock grazing on the Preserve has been operating under an Environmental Assessment (EA) that expires at the end of 2005. The Trust can write a supplement to this EA and extend existing interim programs for one year. For the past two years, the Trust has had a Replacement Heifer Program and a Cow-Calf Conservation Stewardship Program. Because the Preserve's bulls had grown too large to breed young heifers, the Trust took advantage of a strong market and sold the bulls.

The Trust is weighing four options for the 2006 grazing program:

1. Have no cattle on the Preserve.
2. Offer the Cow-Calf Conservation Stewardship Program with a new application process while substituting steers for the Replacement Heifer Program.
3. Extend the contracts of existing participants in the Cow-Calf Conservation Stewardship Program while substituting steers for the Replacement Heifer Program.
4. Replace both current programs with yearling-stocker steers.

Ms. Hephner explained that in a yearling-stocker program, yearling steers typically weight 450 to 500 pounds. Before government ownership, the Dunigan family for many years ran 6,000 steers without harming their grazing lands. However, local producers might not be able to provide yearlings, so the yearlings would possibly come from outside of the state. The yearling-stocker program would generate the most revenue, and yearlings are easier to manage and could be run in one herd. However, steers from lower altitudes might experience problems at the higher altitudes of the Preserve.

In response to a question from the public, Marie Rodriguez, Resources Coordinator, said the 2005 Cow-Calf Program had three individuals and one livestock association with 28 members participating. Under existing programs, neighboring ranchers, including Jemez Pueblo, have benefited, and the Preserve has benefited. But the programs are not breaking even financially because the EA limits the number of cattle and areas that can be grazed.

In response to questions from John Caid, Mr. Dils responded that existing programs gross about \$32,000. Option 3 could gross about \$43,000. Option 4 could gross about \$78,000, but these programs would still not break even. Option 1 would save some money currently spent to operate the current programs, but certain labor-intensive activities, such as fence maintenance, are necessary in any case.

Several members of the public voiced their support for Option 3. They noted that the revenues generated by the grazing program depend on the number of cattle allowed. The Trust could increase revenues by increasing cattle numbers. They said participating ranchers have had good results in the programs. Anthony Armijo of Jemez Pueblo pointed out that the Conservation Stewardship Program had allowed the Pueblo to rest its lands and make improvements.

Roger Tilkemeier, a rancher and businessman, said each grazing program should be evaluated from a bottom-line financial perspective. Once the Preserve reaches financial sustainability, the Trust could then offer programs that did not generate positive revenues.

Dr. Parmenter said that the underlying philosophy of the EA is to experiment and try different livestock grazing strategies. Learning about steers operation could be extremely valuable.

Ray Loretto made a motion to adopt Option 3, which was seconded by Barbara Johnson. Larry Icerman proposed a friendly amendment acknowledging that this option (as well as all the others, but Option 1) was dependent upon completing a supplemental EA, which was accepted by Mr. Loretto and Ms. Johnson.

During a discussion of the potential costs, Cliff Dils pointed out the difficulty in coming up with reliable financial estimates until the environmental process is complete. One attendee said he thought the decision was premature and suggested that the Board should have better cost estimates before making a decision. Ms. Hephner said a number of current program participants are waiting for a decision so they know what to do with their herds. Mr. Gosz spoke in opposition to the motion. He said the Trust has an opportunity to collect data on grazing steers for one year without making a commitment to a program that would be instituted permanently.

The results could assist the Board in making future decisions. Barbara Johnson also requested more detailed financial numbers.

Mr. Loretto withdrew the motion to allow the Board to reflect on the input from the public and consider better financial data.

Mr. Caid noted that selection of Option 4 would cut out neighbors and friends participating in the current programs, but that the Trust had a mandate to reach financial sustainability. He suggested making the decision on these options at the December meeting based on the best information available.

VII. Archeology and the Preserve

Ana Steffen, Acting Cultural Resources Coordinator, described the Preserve's ongoing archeology program, which involves site preservation and protection to minimize impacts of projects. The program also involves consultation with neighboring pueblos.

Upon acquisition of the Preserve five years ago, little was known about archeological resources. In five years of information gathering, the staff has recorded 285 archeological sites, which include lithic scatters, obsidian quarries, rock shelters, field houses, multi-room structures, and historic sites. Time periods span Paleo Indian to historic, with most being from the Archaic Period.

Surveys have primarily been linear, along roads and trails in advance of a project, rather than general surveys over a broad area. The Trust staff, the National Park Service, skilled volunteers (Dorothy Hoard and Craig Martin), and the University of New Mexico Southwest Archeology Field School have done the survey work to date.

VIII. Proposed Highway 4 Improvements

Rourke McDermott, Landscape Architect, reported that the Trust is receiving public comments on Highway 4 improvements on the Web site and would also accept comments by mail. Comments have also been solicited from surrounding pueblos. Current plans call for improving the main entrance to the Preserve to address safety issues, and creating a Valle Grande Overlook, a place where people could park safely and enjoy the scenery and view wildlife.

IX. Public Comments

Betsy Barnett of The Pajarito Group and the Rio Grande Chapter of the Sierra Club commented on the Trust's efforts at public information and timing and frequency of meetings, as well as the current means of recording meeting minutes.

Virgil Vigil, a sportsman from Santa Fe, suggested that the Preserve institute a coyote-management plan.

Steve Blodgett noted that about one-half of the public users of the Preserve are hunters and fisherman. He suggested that the Trust increase fees for these activities and continue to manage the Preserve for multiple uses.

Roger Tilkemeier was concerned that the environmental community and the public do not appear to understand that the legislation creating the Valles Caldera National Preserve provided that the Preserve be managed as a working ranch. He offered a one-page summary of the legislation, a suggested mission statement for the Trust, and a definition of a “working ranch.”

John Salazar said good ranch management and wildlife management go hand in hand. He supported the Trust’s commitment to managing a successful ranch operation.

X. Adjourn

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

Chairperson Hephner adjourned the meeting at 9:00 p.m.

Approved on December 16, 2005.

Respectfully submitted by Larry Icerman, Secretary.