

Valles Caldera Trust
Minutes of the Public Meeting – March 1, 2007
Marriott Courtyard
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Board members present

Tracy Hephner, chair
Jim Gosz
Dan Jiron
Bill Keleher
Darlene Koontz
Raymond Loretto

Staff present

Jeffrey Cross, Executive Director
Debbie Boggess, Administrative Officer
Kris Cope, GIS
Rob Dixon, IT Manager and Recreation Coordinator
Karen Montgomery, Wildlife Technician
Martin Pacheco, Recreation Program Manager
Berta Pantoja, Administrative Assistant
Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist
Marie Rodriguez, Natural Resources Coordinator
Anna Steffen, Acting Cultural Resources Coordinator
Dennis Trujillo, Preserve Manager

I. Welcome and Introductions

Chairperson Tracy Hephner called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m. and welcomed attendees.

Approval of Agenda

Hephner asked the board for approval of the agenda. Member Jim Gosz asked that the public comment period be held by 11:00 a.m. and not 11:30 a.m. Hephner asked presenters to shorten their reports to move up the public comment. **Gosz moved and member Darlene Koontz seconded the motion. The agenda was approved.**

Approval of Minutes

Hephner asked the Board to approve the minutes of the December 7, 2006 meeting. Board members made two corrections to minutes – a reference on page 2 to \$600,000 remaining should state that the funds are from a special appropriation. On page 3 a reference in the science report should say Coyote Study. **Gosz moved and member Raymond Loretto seconded the motion to approve the minutes; the motion passed.**

Approval of Executive Session

Hephner asked the Board to approve an executive session, should one be needed. **Darlene Koontz moved and Gosz seconded. The motion passed.**

II. Board Business

Trustee Appointments

Hephner announced that Dan Jiron is a new member of the Board. He is the new supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest. Dan has been in public service for 20 years, beginning as a firefighter on a hotshot crew in Colorado. He also worked for the chief of the Forest Service in Washington D.C. He has worked in Colorado, Utah, Washington D.C. and New Mexico. His father's family has lived in Northern New Mexico since after the Spanish conquest. Hephner said Jiron's experience in Washington and in the Forest Service would be an asset to the Board.

Hephner stated that the six members present were the entire board. Three board members completed their terms in January. In January, member Bill Keleher, executive director Jeff Cross and chairperson Hephner went to Washington for a series of briefings. They received verbal assurance that new board appointments would be made in the spring. Until then, the Board will operate with six members. Hephner thanked the departing board members and said they had been extraordinary board members.

Los Amigos de Valles Caldera

Greg Kendall, vice chairman of Los Amigos de Valles Caldera, the new 'friends' group, said the organization is getting started and that it has a Web site. The goal is to help the Trust accomplish its mission and goals. Los Amigos and VCT will identify projects, and involvement and funding opportunities. He invited meeting attendees to join Los Amigos.

III. Operations

FY07 Budget Report

Hephner said the final FY07 Trust budget is still unknown because VCT hasn't received spending authorization. Debbie Boggess, administrative officer, said the President signed the fourth continuing resolution in February. Trust spending to date was conservative at \$1.2 million. The FY06 appropriation was \$3.65 million.

Hephner said the Board promised the public that it would go forward with workshops on public use and access, and it will issue an RFP for facilitation services. Responses will be due March 12.

Hephner announced that the Board had selected Jack and Pat Hagelstein, of Dexter, NM, to provide cattle and manage a grazing program this summer (500 steers on rapid rotation). For the first time, the Preserve will make a profit on the cattle program. The Hagelsteins were chosen by a panel that included a range specialist, resource specialist, members of the Board and Trust staff. They scored each application. Income to the Trust was not the overriding factor; the panel considered the ability to meet ecological requirements and the ability to communicate what they were learning to the Board and public. Member Darlene Koontz asked how many applications were received. Hephner responded that there were four very different proposals.

Winter Recreation Programs

Recreation manager Rob Dixon reported on winter programs, which included cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, overnight visitation and sleigh rides. To date, visitation totaled 1,820 people and revenues totaled \$20,780. This compares with 482 people and

\$11,140 in revenues in 2006. There was one visitor injury this year due to overexertion, rather than a Preserve safety issue.

Skiing and snowshoeing visitation totaled 1,078 to date, up from zero in 2006. Last year the season was December 23 to March 18; this year the season is December 29 to April 1. There were three free public appreciation days, and three moonlight and three dark night skiing and snowshoeing events. The Preserve offered one free skiing trail.

This year for the first time, the Preserve offered overnight skiing and snowshoeing for 2-3 nights; visitation totaled 66 to date. The season is January 4 to April 1. Comments on the program are generally positive, although some visitors wanted more creature comforts.

Sleigh-ride visitation totaled 388 to date, down from 482 in 2006. The 2007 winter season is January 6 to April 1. The 2006 season was scheduled for December 23 to March 18, but events were cancelled due to lack of snow.

Attendee Greg Kendall said the New Mexico Orienteers held an event last winter that drew about 80 people. Attendee Betsy Barnett asked why the Coyote Call Trail was closed this winter. Preserve staff members Dixon and Trujillo explained that the Coyote Call Trail is open, but a connecting trail leading to Bandelier National Monument is closed. Trust member Darlene Koontz said her Bandelier staff and Preserve staff could work together to see what's possible.

Report to Congress for FY06

Executive Director Jeff Cross said that the Trust is required to submit an annual report to Congress on operations, accomplishments and financial resources. He planned to submit the report to that week and then post it on the Web site.

IV. Existing Programs

Forage Assessment Report

Cross reported that the Forest Service's Forage Assessment Report of the Preserve was nearly complete. Staff member Marie Rodriguez said that the Trust contracted with a Forest Service enterprise team of resource specialists to write the report on existing conditions. The team synthesized existing reports and data into a format useful for adaptive management, planning, implementation and monitoring.

The Trust has 21 reports on soil, water, riparian, vegetation, climate, mammals, insects and fish. It has monitoring data on elk, cattle, water, vegetation and climate. It has reports on past and present actions, such as grazing, timber harvesting, road building and recreation.

Enterprise team specialists assessed conditions at specific sites and in sub-basin watersheds, and established upland and riparian ratings. Upland conditions are based on abiotic (litter cover, bare ground, erosion) and biotic (vegetative diversity and cover, ratios of native to nonnative plants) variables. Riparian ratings are based on water quality, proper functioning condition and stream inventories. Road densities are important because there are 765 road-stream intersections that contribute to sediment erosion into streams.

The final product is written in plain language. The report concluded that 11% of Preserve watersheds are in high condition, 89% are in medium condition and 0% are in low condition. Impacts are associated with past uses, such as logging, road building and livestock grazing. Streams are improving and stream banks are healing.

Attendee Terry Riley asked if the study measured traffic use. Rodriguez answered that the Preserve has a limited number of open roads. Roads are being inventoried to determine which are usable. The Trust is collecting data on erosion and culverts. Road impacts will be assessed over the next year.

The report identifies locations that are suitable for grazing by elk and livestock. About 26,000 acres are suitable for grazing by livestock and elk; another 1,450 are suitable for elk and other wildlife, but not livestock. Most of the areas that are suitable for livestock are in and around the major valleys.

Attendee Marty Peale asked if there is less capacity as animals move up a slope. Rodriguez said that in moving up a slope, animals are farther from water, the soil is shallower and the slopes are steeper. The original Environmental Assessment (EA) capped livestock use at 8,000 AUMs and the Trust has run less than 2,000 AUMs. In a typical year for elk, 10,550 AUMs use areas of 0-30% slope and 400 AUMs use areas of 30-60% slope.

Rodriguez explained that the existing condition report is a tool and a model, not a decision. It's based on available data, accepted standards and several assumptions, and it can be updated with new data. Staff received the report last fall and sent it to Board and staff for review. The Trust will make it available to the public when it is completed. It will be posted on the Web site and available on CD.

Darlene Koontz asked if stock tanks would expand grazing. Rodriguez said that the Preserve has good water availability and few opportunities to increase it. Cross said there are about 160 stock tanks on the Preserve. Koontz asked how they would use this information. Rodriguez said it would be used in planning and resource management. Koontz asked how it would be used for compliance. Cross said the report represents a major increase in the amount of information and will be the basis of the next EA.

State of the Preserve

Jeff Cross said the public had asked questions about the State of the Preserve report during public meetings in September and December 2006. The report is required at least once every five years and is one component of comprehensive management for the Preserve, which is different from other federal agencies. According to the Trust's NEPA procedures, comprehensive management comprises stewardship registers, the State of the Preserve and strategic guidance from the Board.

The State of the Preserve is a concise account of available information. It provides a scientific and technical basis for considering the cumulative effects of past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions. The first report is due in August 2007.

To date, the Preserve has implemented interim programs; it now has the opportunity to look back and assess these programs in the State of the Preserve. The report looks back at the last five years and forward at the next five. The Board must review the report before it issues new strategic guidance. The report is not a NEPA document, but the Trust will take public comments.

Cross explained that when the ranch was in private hands, it had 200-300 visitors a year. In 2006, it had 10,000 visitors and revenues were about \$700,000, largely supported by existing ranch infrastructure. What is the level of visitor and resource use that is sustainable and will generate enough revenue for the Trust to reach financial self-

sufficiency? Cattle are important, but are not a large source of revenue. Merchantable timber resources are modest; large trees dominate only 5% of Preserve forests and most forests are second growth. The Trust spends money on thinning for fire hazard reduction. What level of visitor recreation would produce self-sufficiency? What level of investment is needed in facilities, roads and other infrastructure to support that level of visitation? The Board will look at different levels of use, investments and staffing – low, medium and high; that will be the basis for their strategic guidance to staff.

The State of the Preserve report will be followed by recommendations for strategic guidance (December 2007). Public access and use workshops will be held this summer. Plans for livestock management and public access and use management will be completed in FY08. A forest and fire management plan will be completed in FY09. The schedule depends on the availability of resources.

Darlene Koontz said that the National Park Service has gotten away from comprehensive planning because plans are outdated by the time they are finished. The Trust approach is flexible; it's an experiment in comprehensive planning.

V. New Programs

Spring Turkey Hunt

Preserve Manager Dennis Trujillo reported that in December 2006, the NM Department of Game and Fish authorized the Trust to conduct a spring turkey hunt. The Trust planned two hunts. In the first hunt, eight hunters can purchase a 'deluxe package' for \$1,800 that includes four nights at the lodge and catered meals. In the second hunt, eight hunters can apply through a lottery, which will cost \$20 per chance. The first hunt begins April 20 and the second begins April 27.

Attendee Terry Riley said the Web site shows only 14 chances. Trujillo said the Trust donated two lottery chances to be auctioned by the Wild Turkey Federation, which helped them develop the program and will provide volunteers to conduct the hunts.

VI. Public Comment

Betsy Barnett said the Board should have a sound system. It's frequently hard to hear speakers and Board members during public meetings.

Marty Peale said she is concerned about the State of the Preserve report. It lacks NEPA accountability; public review is voluntary. Why should the public be comfortable with that? Jeff Cross responded that the enabling legislation provides for public involvement. The process is intended to be open and transparent.

Darlene Koontz said that a traditional NEPA-type comprehensive plan has formal public input, but the result is disappointing because the document is outdated. She said she is excited about the State of the Preserve because it is a new approach to comprehensive management. Rodriguez said the Trust will involve the public in assessing conditions and deciding where to go next. In a traditional plan, resource specialists do these steps. Cross said the meetings would allow the public and staff to sit down and work together.

Betsy Barnett said she understood that the recreation staff developed an outline to present to the public. Cross said that was not the case, but they were working on programs. One

new feature is the Web site calendar. He said he would like to see an increase in programs, use and access, and hoped to increase visitation and revenues by 15% this year.

Marty Peale asked if the public involvement efforts on access and use were voluntary, out of good will or were codified in procedures. Hephner responded that the Board has listened to attendees say they don't just want to respond to alternatives presented by the staff. The Trust is making a substantial financial and staff commitment to involve interested public. The process will be documented; there will be a record of what goes on at workshops.

Jim Cummings asked about the Interpretive Master Plan. Cross said the title was misleading; it is really a guidance document to maintain a consistency in Trust message and programs. Trujillo said it's an instrument for all Trust planning efforts. Dixon said the document is in use now in interim programs.

Betsy Barnett said that former executive director Ray Powell said that all comments would be included and addressed in a final product. She asked if the document would have an appendix for public input. She wrote several pages of suggestions, but nothing was included; the Trust should maintain a complete record. Cross responded that comments are usually summarized in EAs or EISs. All comments are retained by the Trust.

Marty Peale asked if the turkey hunt is being done as categorical exclusion. Trujillo said it's an interim recreation program similar to other programs. Peale asked about a wildlife management plan. Cross said the taking of wildlife is managed by the state. The Trust manages habitat, not wildlife. Trujillo said the Trust staff works closely with the state. Hephner said the wildlife inventories by staff indicate that the Trust is doing a good job.

Barnett asked if they knew the population of turkeys, elk and mountain lions. Parmenter said the state Department of Game and Fish and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) estimate the turkey population, based on available habitat, at about 500; the staff estimated the number at 300. The hunts this spring will take 16 male turkeys. Volunteers from the local chapter of the NWTF will conduct surveys before the hunts. Staff will repeat the surveys each spring. Parmenter has proposed to co-fund elk surveys with Game and Fish twice a year. The staff monitors the fish populations. Staff does not know the number of mountain lions or black bears.

Attendee Kendra Sullivan asked where the turkey hunt idea came from. Trujillo said the staff had worked with the state and studied hunting and fishing programs as revenue producers. The Preserve's previous owners offered elk and turkey hunts and fishing, which generated considerable revenue. The state first allowed elk hunting and then turkey hunting. Sullivan questioned developing recreation programs without public input. Rodriguez said the Trust offers a number of summer recreation activities; staff doesn't solicit advanced comment on each activity because they are short-term.

An unidentified attendee asked if activities could be based on public suggestions. Dixon said the staff is open to suggestions, but has been unable to pursue several suggested activities because of lack of resources.

VII. Adjourn

Chairperson Hephner asked for a motion to adjourn. Raymond Loretto made the motion, and Darlene Koontz seconded. The motion passed. Hephner adjourned the meeting at noon.