

# Overview

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## *Introduction*

The trust has developed a range of conceptual alternatives for access and use of the preserve for recreation, education, scientific, and commercial activities on the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP). These alternatives each address five individual elements including *Access, Capacity, Activities, Development, and Financing*. These alternatives are called “conceptual” because they describe these elements in a general way. Based on the input we receive during the scoping process we will refine each element of these conceptual alternatives for detailed analysis. This refinement process would hopefully narrow the range of alternatives from five to perhaps only two or three. It could result in mixing and matching elements from the current range of alternatives or developing a completely new alternative.

This overview summarizes each alternative. Overviews providing greater detail for each element are also provided.

## *Alternative A – Current Condition*

Currently the trust manages public access and use of the preserve under an “interim program”. The purpose of the interim program was to provide immediate access to the public as mandated by the Valles Caldera Preservation Act and to gather information for development of a comprehensive plan for access and use. The interim program uses existing facilities and temporary facilities established in areas of the preserve previously disturbed and therefore not significantly affected by public use.

Permanent improvements have included the reconstruction of the main point of entry onto the preserve and deferred maintenance on a portion of the interior road system. The main point of entry onto the preserve, now known as the *Valle Grande Entrance*, is off NM 4 (New Mexico State Highway 4) at mile marker 39. The entrance was reconstructed to meet state highway transportation standards for access and egress based on the current volume of traffic. Deferred maintenance activities have been limited to bringing the existing main arterial roads to a maintenance level 3. This is the most basic level for providing safe access for a prudent driver operating a sedan, van or other low clearance vehicle. This maintenance level is a single-lane with turn-outs and gravel surface. Deferred maintenance activities included the reconstruction of lead outs and other drainage features including culverts which had not been properly constructed or had quit functioning due to lack of maintenance. Modern techniques such as the installation of multi level culverts and inclusion of permeable fill were used to mitigate current disruptions to the movement of water across the valles.

The lack of development has limited access to “casual” visitors or those who spontaneously stop by the preserve with no particular activity or destination in mind. Instead the trust has developed a niche offering of “special interest” activities not provided elsewhere in the region or even typically offered on public land. These special interest activities require some degree of advance planning and logistical support by the trust. There is also a greater level of control over the environment necessary to ensure a high quality experience. For example, hunters must win access through a lottery drawing and attend a mandatory orientation session prior to the hunt and have semi exclusive access to a designated hunting area. In addition, other activities that may interfere with hunting are limited in time or place to avoid conflicts. This is quite different from the surrounding Santa Fe National Forest where a hunter draws a license of a

large area and has open access anywhere in the area including some private land parcels. This open access is shared by hundreds of others. The exclusive hunting experience enjoyed on the preserve for as low as a \$25.00 lottery ticket compares to the expensive, exclusive hunting offered on private lands.

Similarly running, mountain biking, or orienteering events; artistic or spiritual pursuits, wildlife viewing, bird watching, outdoor clinics, scientific research and environmental education all benefit through the controlled access. The benefits to special use activities are often overshadowed by the lack of access to casual visitors who desire to spontaneously participate in general recreation activities, especially hiking. In fact, a special interest group, Caldera Action, originally dedicated to preserving ecological integrity and expanding public access has now cited turning management of the preserve over to the National Park Service in order to increase casual access for general interest activities, especially hiking, as their primary mission.

The current capacity of about 25,000 visitors annually would remain the same. This number represents less than 5 percent of the potential market for casual visitors. Capital investment requirements would be limited to addressing deferred maintenance needs and annual operating costs would remain about 4.3 million with an expected recovery of 15-20 percent or \$.6 - .9 million annually.

### *Alternative B*

Under Alternative B a full service visitor facility in proximity to the Valle Grande would be developed. This visitor center would be supported by ancillary facilities and infrastructure including ADA compliant access to overlooks, interpretive trails, and group areas suitable for hosting interpretive programs. The VGSA would be eliminated under this alternative. BBSA would be retained and upgraded to a permanent facility with improved amenities. While access could still be arranged remotely, the development of a visitor center would greatly increase spontaneous access by for casual visitors.

Under this alternative the trail system would be expanded to an interconnected series of trails designed to support backpacking. An estimated 75-100 miles of trails would access most regions of the preserve including the caldera rim within the preserve's boundary. Where possible, level 1 roads would continue to serve as trails with new construction occurring only as necessary.

Alternative B would support an annual capacity of about 100,000 visitor days or about 16 percent of the potential market of casual visitors. Daily visitation on a peak summer weekend day would be about 650 visitors.

This alternative also supports overnight development such as a small (+/- 20 unit) campground and the development of primitive overnight camping to enhance recreational use on the preserve. Development of visitor facilities and expanded trails would greatly expand access for casual and general interest visitors. However, motorized access to the preserve remains limited and annual operating costs are still expected to be relatively low. Back country access is expanded for longer hikes including overnight hiking. However no additional access is created outside NM 4, retaining the ability to control access in time and space, preserving the ability to continue providing special interest activities such as hunting and wildlife viewing and hosting special events.

Under this alternative no dedicated access for snowmobiles or ATV's would be established. This type of motorized access could be provided as part of a special interest event.

This alternative would require a capital investment of \$44 million and annual operating costs would run an estimated \$6.6 million, with an expected recovery of 61 percent or \$4 million.

### *Alternative C*

Alternative C includes the construction of the visitor center as described under Alternative B. The road maintenance level would be improved on about 20-40 miles of interior road. The trail system would be expanded to provide shorter routes for increased day hikes, warranting the development of self serve pay stations to access the preserve from its shared boundary with the Santa Fe National Forest or Bandelier National Monument.

The interconnected trail system proposed under Alternative B would be enhanced by additional trails creating shorter loops for increased day hiking. The total trail system would be expanded about 100 - 150 miles. Trails would continue to be on level 1 roads where possible with new construction as necessary. Additional access to the preserve for hiking may be provided through self pay fee stations located on the preserve's boundaries with the Santa Fe National Forest. Under this alternative no dedicated access for snowmobiles or ATV's would be established. This type of motorized access could be provided as part of a special interest event.

Annual capacity under this alternative is estimated at 150,000 visitor days or 25 percent of the potential casual visitor market. The average capacity on any summer weekend is estimated at nearly 1000 visitors.

Development under Alternative C includes the development of a large (+/- 100) unit campground with cabins and RV hook-ups. A small (+/- 20 rooms) luxury lodge is also proposed under this alternative along with a full service equestrian center.

The increase in the numbers and distribution of visitors would favor expanding general interest activities and providing some of the special interest activities that do not require exclusive access to large areas, such as fishing and other outdoor skill activities, on a regular or even daily basis. Special interest activities that require exclusive or controlled access such as hunting, wildlife viewing, or scientific research, may occur somewhat less or be limited in time or place under this alternative.

Equestrian activities would be a focus for development under this alternative. The equestrian center would provide for seasonal horse rentals offering visitors the opportunity to trail ride or participate in working ranch activities.

About \$88 million capital investments would be required in capital investment to implement Alternative C. Annual operating costs are estimated at just under \$10 million, with annual revenues estimated at \$7 million, reflecting an estimated cost recovery of 79 percent.

### *Alternative D*

Access under Alternative D would be similar as under Alternative C. This alternative includes the greatest expansion of the preserves trail system to 150-200 miles in total. Capacity would be estimated at 175,000 visitors annually with a peak daily (weekend summer) visitation averaging nearly 1200 visitors. This reflects a capture of about 29 percent of the potential market of casual visitors.

This alternative continues to expand general interest and equestrian related activities while further limiting special interest activities requiring control over the environment such as hunting and wildlife viewing. The development of

more exterior points of access would further distribute general access activities favoring these types of activities over special interest activities

This increase in capacity is based on the development of mid-level lodging with meeting or conference facilities and the addition of developed camping with horse amenities. The increase in the trail system would warrant additional self service fee access and increasing amenities throughout the preserve such as parking or shuttle stops, picnic areas, trailheads, and of course restrooms.

Alternative D would require a \$143 million investment in capital improvements over 10 years and incur \$11.9 million in annual operating costs. Annual revenues would be estimated at \$11.8 million; recovering 99 percent of annual operating costs.

### *Alternative E*

Access under Alternative E would include the elements as described in Alternatives C and D. Permitted access via a level 4 road would be extended with the development of 40-60 miles of level 4 road accesses. Access specifically for science and education programs would be developed in the southwest corner, south of NM4 (across from BBSA).

Capacity under Alternative E is estimated at 200,000 visitors annually, capturing one third of the potential market for causal visitors. A peak summer weekend day could see average daily visitation more than 1300 visitors.

This alternative would not include a developed equestrian campground, but would retain the equestrian center. The development of formal science and education programs would be emphasized under this alternative with the development of an education and science center. However, long term field research projects could be limited in time or place due to the expansion and distribution of access throughout the preserve.

Overall the alternative optimizes general use activities through the development of lodging and increasing access into the preserve's interior.

This alternative would require capital investments of \$143 million over 10 years, have an expected annual operating cost of 12.1 million, and would expect to recover 100 percent of those annual costs.