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For More Information:
Jeffrey Cross, Executive Director
Valles Caldera Trust
505-661-3333

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NEWS RELEASE

Valles Caldera Trust Suspends Livestock Grazing for the 2006 Season

“The Valles Caldera Trust has decided that, due to drought and poor range conditions, it would be best not to have livestock grazing on the Preserve during the 2006 season,” announced new Executive Director, Jeffrey Cross.

At their December 2005 board meeting, the Board of Trustees voted to explore a steer program based on the standing biomass on the Preserve in October and assuming normal winter precipitation. The Board hoped that a steer program would break even financially.

The Trust was in negotiations with New Mexico State University regarding management of the steers and had advertised for owners interested in bringing their steers onto the Preserve when concerns began to arise about conditions on the Preserve due to persistent drought.

In keeping with the requirements of the grazing 2002 Environmental Assessment and 2003 Amendment, and with the Trust’s emphasis on science-based adaptive management, on Tuesday, April 25 and Thursday, April 27, 2006, a range readiness assessment was conducted on the Preserve. Participants included Brett O’Haver (BLM Rangeland Analyst, Cuba Field Office), Randy McKee (livestock operations contractor), Will Barnes (Trust contract botanist), Marty Peale (Valles Caldera Coalition coordinator), Barbara Johnson (Trustee), Robert Parmenter (Preserve Scientist), Marie Rodriguez (Trust Natural Resources Coordinator), Suzanne Gifford (Trust Biologist), and Anya Byers (Trust Biological Field Technician).

Metrics assessed included the amount of forage available for cattle; the nutritional value and current health of grasses and plants; soil moisture, which provides an indication of the amount of forage that may be produced in upcoming weeks; and available water in valle streams and upland tanks.

Said Board Vice Chair, Barbara Johnson who participated in the assessment for the Board, “I was shocked at how low the water was on the East Fork and how dry the soil

was.”

Preserve Scientist Dr. Robert Parmenter, presented Dr. Cross and Dennis Trujillo, Preserve Manager, with his report from the assessment on May 1 (Dr. Cross’s first day on the job). (A copy of that **Range Readiness Analysis for VCT livestock program for summer 2006** is available on our website, http://www.vallescaldera.gov/ranching/grazing/grazing_readiness.aspx.)

Dr. Cross then told the Board about the conditions on the Preserve. Said Board Chairperson, Tracy Hephner, “Jeff has fully briefed the Board on the reasons for his decision and we agree with it.”

Those reasons include:

- ❖ There was virtually no snowpack on the Preserve this winter and cumulative precipitation as of April is one-third what it was last year. According to the USGS, surface flows in the Jemez River are only 5% of the long-term average and the third lowest spring stream flows recorded. Predictions by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for May, June, and July indicate that northern New Mexico will experience drier and warmer than average conditions.
- ❖ The elk herd (estimated by the NM Department of Game and Fish at approximately 3,000 animals) did not leave the Preserve for lower-elevation winter ranges, and instead remained on and foraged within the Preserve all winter.
- ❖ The grasslands in the Preserve are beginning to green up, but surface soils are dry. Peak soil moisture in Valle Grande was about 30% lower this year than in 2005. Without substantial additional rainfall, vegetation conditions will continue to deteriorate.
- ❖ Upland water sources (stock tanks, springs) are also drying quickly, and may not be available for livestock. Water availability was rated poor or fair in 11 of the 12 pastures on the Preserve. This could lead to increased livestock use of riparian areas, causing degradation in water quality and streambank geomorphology that may negatively affect fish populations.
- ❖ Forage biomass in Preserve pastures decreased by more than 65% from October 2005 to April 2006. In normal years with snowpack on the Preserve, forage biomass would be expected to decrease by 20-30%. The presence of elk on the Preserve over the winter contributed to the larger than normal decrease.
- ❖ Forage nutritional values indicate that protein, nutrient, and digestibility levels of the 2005 cured forage (approximately 70% of current biomass) are poor, and without spring/summer rainfall to support new seasonal plant growth, forage quality will be insufficient to produce steer weight gains without supplementary proteins and minerals.
- ❖ Based on assumptions outlined in the 2002 Environmental Assessment and the 2003 Amendment, the potential contract with New Mexico State

University, and the available forage from the range readiness assessment, the maximum number of steers that could be supported on the Preserve was estimated at 719, or about one-third of the number needed to break even financially.

According to Dr. Cross, Dr. Parmenter, and Mr. Trujillo, the potential benefits to the Preserve of postponing the livestock program until 2007 include:

- ❖ improved forage availability for the Jemez Mountain elk herd and preservation of rangeland vegetation;
- ❖ better stream water quality;
- ❖ potentially favorable changes to streambank geomorphology, with streams becoming deeper and narrower due to plant colonization and establishment on exposed stream edges;
- ❖ reducing potential damage to recreational fisheries;
- ❖ providing a large-scale “experiment” for natural resource response to lack of livestock (i.e., changes in natural resource characteristics from large herbivore activities would be attributed solely to elk).
- ❖ potential to conduct small-scale, site-specific experiments in livestock operations (e.g., food selection behavior, monthly weight gain, behavior comparison between steers, cow-calf pairs, and heifers).

The Valles Caldera Trust oversees the Valles Caldera National Preserve, formerly the privately owned “Baca Ranch.” The 89,000-acre property is located in the Jemez Mountains in northern New Mexico. It was purchased by the federal government in 2000 under the Valles Caldera Preservation Act. The property is known for its huge meadows, abundant wildlife, meandering streams, and remarkable scenery. The mission of the Valles Caldera Trust is to create a successful model of public land management that protects and preserves the Valles Caldera National Preserve’s unique values. Toward that end, the Trust will operate the Preserve as a working ranch; strive to become financially self-sustaining; meet varied needs of visitors; strive to utilize and steward the multiple resources of the preserve; and work collaboratively with our neighbors.

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